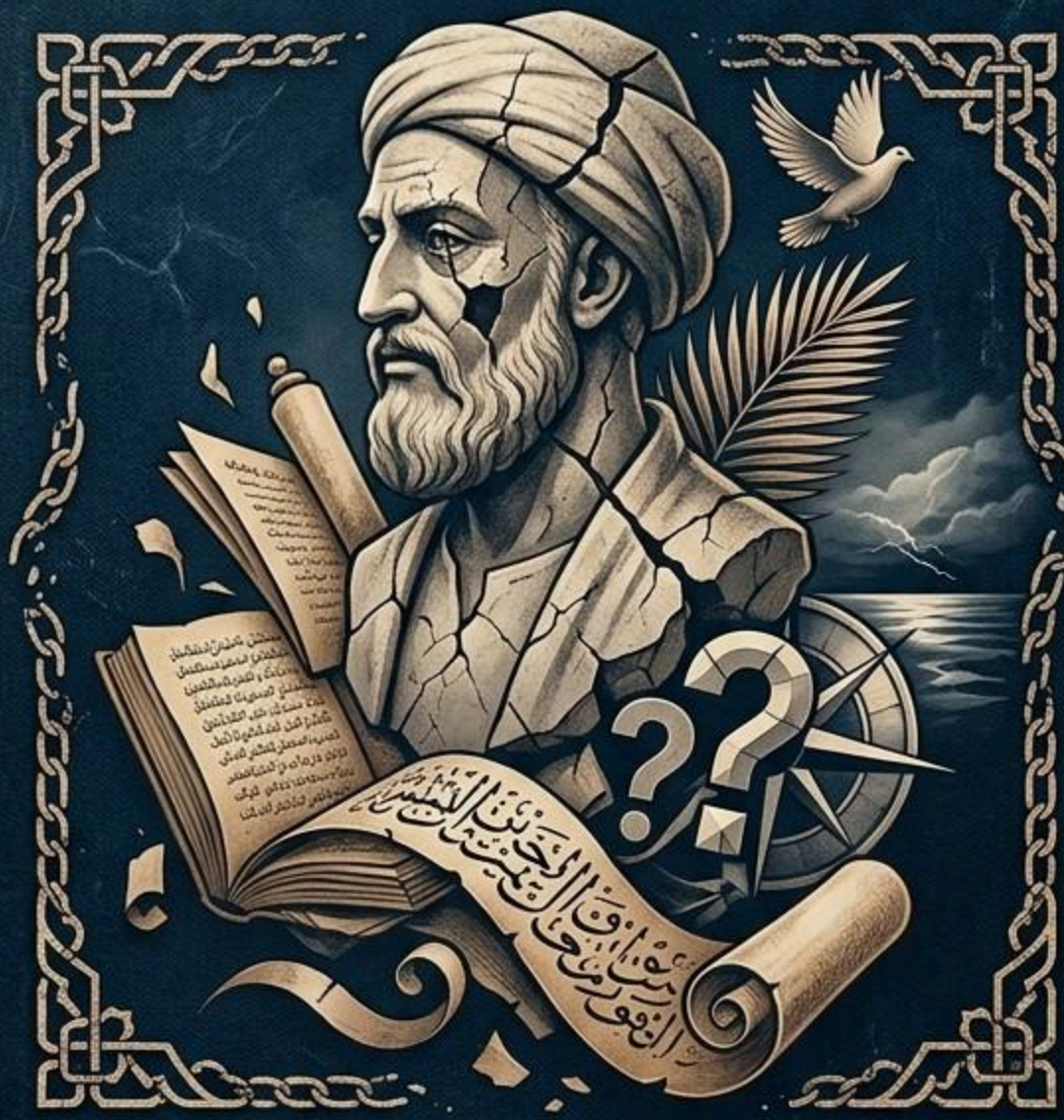
AL-MA'ARRI

HUMANIST PHILOSOPHER AND REBEL POET



ADEL ELSHERIF

A VEGAN SECULAR EXPLORATION OF DOGMA AND COMPASSION

Al-Maʿarri: Humanist Philosopher and Rebel Poet

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Preface

Al-Maʿarri: Humanist Philosopher and Rebel Poet

This book is about a great poet, philosopher, and above all, a deeply human thinker.

In his early writings, before his ideas evolved, Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri showed remarkable sympathy for animals. His compassion extended beyond species, rooted in a philosophy that rejected cruelty in all forms.

His ethical convictions led him to practice extreme asceticism and eventually to become a strict vegan, one of the earliest known figures in history to reject all animal products.

Some Muslim scholars called him a heretic or atheist. Others insisted he was a devout Muslim.

What they often overlook is that people evolve. Al-Maʿarri was born into a traditional Muslim environment.

His teachers were Muslim, and he followed religious norms in his youth. But over time, his views changed drastically.

After once praising religious figures, he later called them liars.

He referred to sacred stories as fables meant to amuse feeble minds, and described religious people as lacking reason.

The culmination of his philosophical journey is found in his final, definitive works:

The Epistle of Forgiveness and The Luzūmiyyāt. These texts serve not as a record of dogma, but as a fearless manifesto for rationalism, reflecting a mind that had moved far beyond inherited faith.

The Luzūmiyyāt, in particular, was one of the most intellectually provocative books of its age, earning him the labels 'atheist' and 'heretic,' and ensuring his work remained controversial for a thousand years.

Regardless of his religious stance, Al-Maʿarri's ideas left a profound mark on the world.

When translated into English, his modern views on critical thinking, nonviolence, and human dignity made a deep impact on readers. In 2013, extremist groups beheaded his statue in Maʿarra.

But they could not erase his legacy.

Though some editions of his work have been censored or distorted to hide his criticisms, his voice still survives, clear, courageous, and timeless.

"Mosques and churches, even a Kaaba Stone,

Korans and Bibles, even a martyr's bone,

All these and more my heart can tolerate,

For my religion's love, and love alone."

—Al-Maʿarri, Luzūmiyyāt, Quatrain LXII

This book hopes to honor that voice, not by judging it, but by listening to it.

Al-Maʿarri's journey from tradition to radical thought reminds us that the search for truth is never still.

It moves, questions, and dares, with love as its final creed.

1: The Early Life & Education

Abu al-Ala al-Maʿarrī was an Arab philosopher, poet, and writer.

His early life, including his birth, education, and the beginnings of his career, unfolded in Syria and neighboring cities.

Birth and Family Background

Al-Maʿarrī was born in December 973 in the city of al-Ma'arra, now known as Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, Syria.

He was born during the later Abbasid era, when the city was part of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Islamic Golden Age.

His nisba* ("al-Maʿarrī") derives from his birthplace, al-Ma'arra, located southwest of Aleppo.

He belonged to the Banu Sulayman, a prominent family in Ma'arra, which was part of the larger Tanukh tribe.

The Tanukh tribe had long been part of the Syrian aristocracy.

Several members of the Banu Sulayman family were also known for their poetic talent.

One of his ancestors was likely the first qadi* (judge) of Ma'arra,his birth occurred on a Friday at sunset, three days before the end of Rabi' al-Awwal in 363 AH.

Al-Maʿarrī learned of his father's death in 1004–05 and composed an elegy in his honor.

His mother died shortly before his return to Ma'arra in 1010.

Childhood and Education

Al-Maʿarrī became blind from smallpox at a young age, then began composing poetry around the age of 11 or 12.

His early education took place in Ma'arra and Aleppo.

He later studied in Aleppo, Tripoli, and Antioch.

Among his teachers in Aleppo were associates of Ibn Khalawayh, a grammarian and Islamic scholar who died in 980 CE, while al-Maʿarrī was still a child.

Al-Maʿarrī later mourned Ibn Khalawayh in a poem included in his Risālat al-Ghufrān.

According to al-Qifti, during a journey to Tripoli, al-Maʿarrī stopped at a Christian monastery near Latakia, where he listened to debates on Hellenistic philosophy that allegedly influenced his secular views. And it is very possible that he bought Greek books because there are translated books to Arabic these days.

However, other historians, such as Ibn al-Adim, disputed this, asserting that he was not exposed to theology outside of Islamic doctrine.

Early Career and Travels to Baghdad

An early poetry collection, The Tinder Spark (Saqṭ az-Zand*), established his reputation and gained popularity.

It included praise for the people of Aleppo and Sa'd al-Dawla, the Hamdanid ruler, as well as poems about armor.

Years after his father's death, al-Maʿarrī traveled to Baghdad, where he was welcomed in the city's literary salons. He arrived in Baghdad in 398 AH (998 CE) and again in 399 AH (999 CE).

Despite the warm reception, he remained a controversial figure.

While in Baghdad, he chose not to sell his writings, an ascetic decision that led to financial hardship.

He stayed in Baghdad for approximately eighteen months (or one year and seven months) before returning to Syria around 1010.

Upon returning to Ma'arra in 1010, he learned that his mother had died before his arrival.

He then adopted a secluded, ascetic lifestyle, refusing to sell his poetry.

Due to his blindness and self-imposed isolation, he described himself as "a double prisoner".

2:Al-Maʿarri's Intellectual Evolution and Companionship

The stark difference between Al-Maʿarri's early works and his later masterpieces, especially The Epistle of Forgiveness and The Luzūmiyyāt, reveals a profound philosophical transformation.

In his youth, Al-Maʿarri adhered more closely to conventional religious language and societal norms. He praised the Prophet Muhammad and referenced prophetic stories with respect, often treating them as historical accounts. This is why many believe he was a practicing Muslim early in life.

However, his later writings reflect a radical shift. After returning from Baghdad and entering self-imposed seclusion around 1010 AD, Al-Maʿarri embraced skepticism and asceticism.

In The Luzūmiyyāt, he famously dismissed religious narratives as fabrications, declaring that “men lived comfortably till they came and spoiled life.”

His critiques of the Hajj, scriptures, and prophets solidified his reputation as a freethinker, possibly a deist or atheist.

Al-Maʿarri Was Never Alone

Despite his blindness and isolation, Al-Maʿarri was surrounded by devoted companions.

He came from a noble family, and many relatives and students voluntarily assisted him by reading and writing on his behalf.

- Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān, his nephew, served as both a judge in Maʿarra and a literary assistant.

- ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad, another nephew and judge, helped care for him.

- Jaʿfar ibn Sulaymān read extensively to him, including classical literature.

These companions ensured that Al-Maʿarri remained intellectually active and socially connected, even in seclusion.

Character and Philosophy

Historians note Al-Maʿarri's exceptional intelligence and memory.

He began composing poetry at age 11.

Though shy by nature, he was morally courageous and outspoken when he saw injustice.

He refused gifts and money, disliked self-praise, and maintained a humble lifestyle, wearing simple clothes and eating modest food.

He believed human nature was fundamentally flawed, and he even distrusted himself.

His writings express deep existential anxiety and pessimism, portraying life as suffering and wearisome.

He never married nor kept concubines, unlike many of his contemporaries, though he advised his followers to marry, recognizing it as a natural human desire.

Legacy and Loss

Al-Maʿarri reportedly authored over 70 works, most of which were lost or destroyed. While he called himself a “double prisoner” (blindness and isolation), others called him a poet, philosopher, scientist, and detractors simply “the blind.”

One early prose work, Risālah fī Tafhiyat Abī ʿAlī bimā Yubtaliju al-Rijāl fī Qalb Abī al-Azhar (“An Epistle on Consoling Abu Ali Regarding What Afflicts Men in the Heart of Abu al-Azhar”), reflects his early intellectual phase.

It uses respectful religious language, including references to Nimrod and Abraham, and praises the Prophet Muhammad with traditional honorifics.

These elements show that Al-Maʿarri’s skepticism developed gradually, not suddenly.

A Journey of Thought

Al-Maʿarri’s intellectual revolution, from a traditionally educated Muslim to a radical skeptic, is well documented.

His early works reflect conventional belief, while his later writings challenge religious orthodoxy and embrace reason as the only guide.

The presence of religious figures in his early texts does not contradict his later views, it simply marks the trajectory of a mind in motion.

3:Love and Humanism in The Luzūmiyyāt

Al-Maʿarri’s Rejection of Sectarianism: A Humanistic Protest Against Hate and War.

Al-Maʿarri’s intense critique of organized religion stems not from mere intellectual rebellion, but from a profound ethical concern: the suffering caused by religious hatred, sectarian division, and war.

His poetry exposes the violence and hypocrisy embedded in religious institutions while offering a radical alternative—a creed of love, reason, and universal compassion.

1. Rejecting Sectarianism and Advocating Pity

Al-Maʿarri directly links religious sects to confusion and conflict. In his masterpiece, The Luzūmiyyāt, he urges readers to abandon theological squabbles and embrace empathy. He writes:

"Shun the hundred Sects that prate / About the things they little know about."

"Let all receive thy pity, none thy hate." (Quatrain LXIII)

This call to pity over hate is not just poetic; it's philosophical. Al-Maʿarri sees sectarianism as a distraction from true virtue and compassion as the only path forward. For him, the endless theological debates and divisions among different faiths and even within the same faith were utterly pointless, serving only to fuel animosity.

By advocating for universal pity, he was replacing the rigid boundaries of faith with a borderless human emotion.

This leads to his profound redefinition of faith. In a preceding quatrain, he declares love as his sole religion—a creed broad enough to encompass all of humanity.

"My religion is love, and my prayer, / My passion, a burning desire."

This powerful statement replaces the dogma of organized religion with a universal, humanistic ethic.

2. Condemning War, Strife, and Hypocrisy

Al-Maʿarri's critique is not abstract—it targets the real-world consequences of religious rigidity.

He denounces the "follies and evils of his age," including tyrannous rulers, venal judges, and hypocritical theologians who used religion as a tool for power and personal gain. He describes "roving swarms of dervishes and godless Carmathians" as symptoms of moral decay, but his deeper point is that such extremism is born from a corrupted religious system.

He rejects prophetic narratives, writing:

"Men lived comfortably till they came and spoiled life. The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce."

His solution? Reason, the only guide capable of replacing dogma and preventing conflict.

He believed that if people were to follow their own intellect instead of ancient texts, they would naturally arrive at a more compassionate and peaceful way of life.

In one of his most poignant appeals, he asks:

"Almighty God! will all the human race / Stray blindly from the Truth's most sacred shrine?"

This question follows his critique of religious practices across Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, including his condemnation of the Hajj as "a pagan's journey"showing that his despair was for all of humanity, not just one religious group.

A Humanistic Remedy

Al-Maʿarri's humanistic call, "Let all receive thy pity, none thy hate" is not a passive plea.

It's a philosophical remedy for the violence and division caused by religious sects and cults. His poetry urges us to abandon inherited hatred and embrace a universal ethic rooted in love, reason, and compassion.

He was a voice for a shared humanity in a world fractured by faith, and his words remain a powerful testament to the idea that true spirituality lies in our treatment of one another, not in our adherence to religious rituals.

While The Luzūmiyyāt (or Unnecessary Necessity) is often remembered for Al-Maʿarri's biting pessimism and relentless critique of hypocrisy, dogma, and political corruption, it also reveals a profound and unifying ethical vision: Love and Universal Compassion.

Precisely because he rejected sectarianism and ritualistic conflict,

Al-Maʿarri proposed a higher creed—one rooted in empathy, tolerance, and the sanctity of life.

The Religion of Love and Tolerance

In defiance of divisive religious structures,

Al-Maʿarri declares "love, and love alone" as his true faith. In one of his most celebrated quatrains, he writes:

"Now, mosques and churches, even a Kaaba Stone.

Korans and Bibles, even a martyr's bone,

All these and more my heart can tolerate.

For my religion's love, and love alone." (Quatrain LXII)

The Central Message

The last two lines provide the core thesis of the quatrain:

"All these and more my heart can tolerate":

This line is a powerful rhetorical device.

He isn't saying he embraces or believes in them; he is merely stating that he can tolerate them.

This implies a level of detached acceptance,he sees them as human constructs that he can live with, but they hold no personal spiritual meaning for him. His heart is not captured by them.

"For my religion’s love, and love alone".

This final line is the ultimate conclusion.

By stripping away all the external trappings of faith, the buildings, the books, the relics, he reveals his true religion: love.

This is not romantic love, but a universal, humanistic compassion that is boundless and requires no specific rituals, doctrines, or sacred places.

His faith is an internal, ethical one, rooted in empathy and benevolence for all.

In this single quatrain, Al-Ma'arri masterfully dismantles the external forms of religion to reveal what he believes is the only truly sacred and unifying force: universal love.

Universal Pity and the Rejection of Hate

This declaration is followed by a direct ethical appeal to prioritize humanity over theological division:

“To humankind, O Brother, consecrate

Thy heart, and shun the hundred Sects that prate

About the things they little know about

Let all receive thy pity, none thy hate.” (Quatrain LXIII)

Al-Maʿarri urges us to consecrate our hearts to humankind, not to creeds.

His rejection of “the hundred sects” is not a dismissal of belief, but a call to rise above ignorance and embrace compassion.

Compassion and the Sanctity of Life

Al-Maʿarri’s humanism extends beyond humanity to all sentient beings. His ascetic lifestyle and vegetarian ethics reflect a deep reverence for life:

“Thy life with guiltless life-blood do not stain.

Hunt not the children of the woods; in vain

Thou'lt try one day to wash thy bloody hand:

Nor hunter here nor hunted long remain." (Quatrain XC)

He even asserts:

"To let go of a flea is a more virtuous act than to give a dirham to a beggar."

This radical compassion, toward humans, animals, and even the smallest creatures forms the moral core of Al-Maʿarri's philosophy. It is not ritual, but mercy, that defines virtue.

4: Supremacy of Reason & The Virtue of Doubt

The concept of reason as the supreme guide is one of the most defining philosophical themes in the life and work of Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri. It permeates his poetry collection Luzūm mā lam yalzam stands as a cornerstone of his intellectual rebellion against superstition, dogma, and inherited authority.

Al-Maʿarri, often described as a pessimistic freethinker and controversial rationalist, rejected the religious and cultural norms of his time.

He did not merely question tradition, he dismantled it, replacing it with a rigorous commitment to reason, doubt, and moral clarity.

Reason as the Supreme Guide

Al-Maʿarri's poetry presents reason not just as a tool, but as a prophet—a divine force capable of guiding humanity toward truth and virtue.

1. Rejection of Authority and Tradition

He placed reason above inherited beliefs, arguing that reliance on tradition stifles human potential. He fought what he called the "battle of the human intellect" against the falsehoods of law and religion, urging readers to think freely and reject societal preconceptions.

2. Moral and Spiritual Guidance

For Al-Maʿarri, reason was not only intellectual—it was ethical. He believed that virtue is its own reward, and that reason alone could guide the soul toward moral clarity. In the Luzūmiyyāt, he writes that reason is the “only prophet and guide.”

3. Doubt as a Pathway to Truth

Doubt, in Al-Maʿarri’s view, is not weakness—it is strength. He encourages readers to embrace uncertainty, declaring:

“Better far is doubt / Which brings the false into the light of day.”

Philosophical Expression in The Luzūmiyyāt

Despite its famously complex rhyme scheme, The Luzūmiyyāt is a clear vessel for Al-Maʿarri’s rationalist philosophy.

- Elevated Perspective

He invites readers to rise above ritual and dogma:

“Shun the tavern and the temple—come up with me, O Brother, to the heights.”

- Reason Over Afterlife Dogma

He questions the existence of Heaven and Hell, writing:

“Then Jannat or Juhannam? From the height / Of reason I can see neither fire nor light.”

- Divinity in Reason

Translator Ameen Rihani described Al-Maʿarri’s philosophy as “Divinity under the cover of a philosophy of extinction,” calling reason the “living oracle of the Soul.”

Context of Rationality: Blindness and Inner Vision

Al-Maʿarri's rationalism was shaped not only by intellect, but by experience.

Blind from a young age, he described himself as a "double prisoner" confined by blindness and isolation. Later, he added a third prison: his own body.

Yet this physical confinement led to a profound inner vision. He wrote:

"Heir shall be / To the increasing flames of mystery / Which may illumine yet my prisons all."

In the absence of sight, reason became his light. His seclusion and asceticism were not acts of despair, but philosophical discipline.

Though often labeled an atheist, his worldview was closer to deism—a belief in a rational, impersonal force rather than a personal god.

Reason as Redemption

In The Luzūmiyyāt, Al-Maʿarri offers a radical alternative to inherited belief: a life guided by reason, doubt, and moral clarity. His poetry does not merely critique religion—it proposes a new creed, one that elevates the human intellect and embraces the quiet dignity of truth.

5:The philosophy of Al-Maʿarrī

Reflections from Abu al-Ala al-Maʿarrī

Al-Maʿarrī was a humanistic poet and philosopher who refused to earn a living by praising others. While most poets of his time relied on Madah or the art of flattery and praise to sustain themselves,

Al-Maʿarrī rejected this practice. Disillusioned by the hypocrisy and emptiness of his era, he used irony, sarcasm, and sharp wit to critique rulers, religions, and religious clerics alike.

He alternated between agnostic, atheist, and deist views, challenging dogma and embracing reason. Though despised by the powerful, his poetry resonated deeply with the public, who admired his boldness and brilliance.

Pessimism and the Nature of Existence

Al-Maʿarrī often described life as a burden, a fleeting illusion shadowed by suffering and death.

Blind from childhood and withdrawn from society, he called himself a “double prisoner”—trapped by both darkness and solitude.

“Soften your tread. Methinks the earth’s surface is but bodies of the dead.

Walk slowly in the air, so you do not trample on the remains of God’s servants.”

In one of his most haunting metaphors, he likens life to a fast, and death to the moment of release:

“I am fasting throughout life, and my breaking of the fast is death.

That day shall be my feast.”

He reflects on the brevity of joy:

“How can I spend an hour happily,

Knowing that death is one of my creditors?”

And he urges detachment from worldly pursuits:

“Oh, my brother, do not seek after worldly life,

For I turn away from it in the company of my brethren.”

Even the Earth, he says, consumes us all:

“The Earth is like us, seeking sustenance.

It eats these people and drinks.”

His sorrow culminates in a lament for the newborn:

“Woe to him who begets a child.

Would that the child had died the moment he was laid down,

And not sucked the breast of his mother, who would cause him injury and suffering.”

Anti-natalist Views

Al-Maʿarrī's poetry often questions the morality of birth itself. He believed that to bring a child into the world was to expose them to inevitable pain.

"This is my father's crime against me,

Which I myself committed against none."

He calls for the end of the human chain:

"If existence must be, let that one be the last.

Let the chain of offspring be cut off.

The father commits a crime against the son, even if the father is ignorant."

Asceticism and Non-Violence

Al-Maʿarrī's asceticism extended to his diet.

He rejected all forms of animal exploitation, embracing vegetarianism and later veganism as a moral imperative.

"Do not unjustly eat what the water has given up.

Do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals,

Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young, not for noble ladies."

He even condemned the taking of honey:

"Do not grieve the unsuspecting birds

By taking their industry from the flowers of fragrant plants.

They did not store it for others, nor gather it for bounty and gifts."

His final reflection is one of regret and awakening:

“I washed my hands of all this.

Would that I had perceived my way

Before my hair turned gray.”

Al-Maʿarrī the Vegan

Al-Maʿarrī the Vegan

Al-Maʿarrī was notable for adopting a strict vegetarian diet during his later life, leading many to recognize him as one of the earliest known vegans. This dietary choice was part of the secluded, ascetic lifestyle he embraced—renouncing worldly desires and opposing all forms of violence.

His philosophy on food, rooted in social justice and rationalism, was expressed powerfully through his poetry.

Key Poetic Stances on Vegan Food

Al-Maʿarrī explicitly rejected the consumption of meat, milk, and even honey, framing his abstinence in moral and ethical terms.

On Meat and Fish:

He condemned the consumption of slaughtered animals and creatures taken from the water. He advised:

“Do not unjustly eat what the water has given up, and do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals.”

“Do not seek sustenance from the wounds of slaughtered animals.”

On Dairy:

He extended his abstinence to dairy products, especially milk, emphasizing the injustice of taking nourishment intended for the young:

"Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young, not for noble ladies."

On Honey:

Al-Maʿarrī included honey in his list of prohibited foods, viewing its consumption as an intrusion upon the natural labor of creatures:

"Do not grieve the unsuspecting birds by taking their industry from the flowers of fragrant plants.

They did not store it for others, nor gather it for bounty and gifts."

So, even honey—drawn from the soul of the bee through its labor is not spared. Man wants to take everything.

"Fear God, even when you taste the honey of bees, for the bees only gathered it for their own souls."

"Your oppression of the bee is what it gives you of the honey."

Context of His Diet and Regret

Al-Maʿarrī's strict diet and asceticism reflected his deep pessimism about life and its suffering. He was described as a man who

"forbids himself the pleasantries of fruit and flowers and the flavors of pure pleasures."

He expressed regret for not adopting his vegan lifestyle earlier, writing:

"I washed my hands of all this; and would that I had perceived my way where my temples grew hoar!"

Despite his restrictive diet, he believed that simple, plant-based food was sufficient:

"Water from a springing plant, with bones, is sufficient sustenance for you."

“If you fast from the food of the living and their drink, do not seek to break your fast through dishonor.”

Direct Verses Advising Against Birth – Antinatalism

Al-Maʿarrī’s poetry directly implores individuals to halt the cycle of reproduction to prevent future misery:

He advised against the propagation of offspring, stating:

“The chain of lineage connected Adam and me

Let it not be extended to offspring.”

A key verse suggests that true happiness lies in non-existence:

“The beginning of happiness is that a person was never created.”

He explicitly advises renouncing the creation of future generations: *“Leave offspring, for its outcome is death.”*

He advocates strict personal abstinence, implying that isolation is a way to avoid life’s suffering:

“The judgment belongs to God, remain alone forever, and do not mix with the varieties of people.”

This verse encapsulates his philosophy of withdrawal and solitude.

Poetry on the Misery of Existence (The Justification)

Al-Maʿarrī’s Luzumiyat collection reinforces his antinatalist stance by portraying life as a realm of suffering, making the creation of new beings seem cruel.

Life as Pervasive Pain

He described life as

“a house of pain, affliction, difficulty, trouble, and sadness.”

The Soul as a Prisoner

Al-Maʿarrī called himself a “double prisoner”confined by blindness and isolation.

He further described the soul’s relationship to the body as one of torment:

“I see myself in three prisons:the wicked body, the condition of the soul.

And the necessity of losing my sight and staying home.”

He likened the soul to a bird trapped in the body, longing for release:

“*The soul regrets its connection to the body after separation.*

It was never created to serve a purpose—so turn away from me, for I am not bound by one.”

Wasted Existence

He wrote that children who die before reaching reason

“will not be resurrected, nor raised, nor meet reward or punishment,”

Emphasizing the futility of their brief suffering.

Death as Release

Since life is torment, death is often portrayed as the only true escape:

“How can I be, in the other abode, safe from misery and resting?”

He also stated that for the believer, the time of breaking the fast is death, and that day is his celebration.

6:Al-Maʿarri’s Love for Animals

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri demonstrated a profound sympathy for animals through his philosophical beliefs and strict ascetic practices,,

most notably, his adoption of a vegan lifestyle. This compassion evolved into a core moral principle that shaped his later life and writings.

Sympathy Reflected in Veganism and Opposition to Violence

Al-Maʿarri became known as a moral vegetarian and eventually practiced veganism, abstaining from all animal products.

He reportedly gave up meat after the age of forty and lived the remaining forty years of his life without consuming or touching the body of any living creature.

He explicitly warned against eating animal products, linking it to injustice and cruelty. In one of his verses, he wrote:

"Do not unjustly eat what the water has given up, and do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals, or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young."

He also condemned the disruption of nature's balance, urging:

"Do not grieve the unsuspecting birds by taking their industry from the flowers of fragrant plants; for they did not store it that it might belong to others."

Al-Maʿarri denounced the killing of animals for food or sport and opposed all forms of violence. His ethical stance was so extreme that he reportedly said:

"To let go of a flea is a more virtuous act than to give a dirham to a beggar."

Personal Demonstration of Sympathy

His compassion was not just theoretical, it was deeply personal. When Al-Maʿarri fell ill, his family secretly slaughtered a chicken (), hoping he would eat it unknowingly. Upon realizing what he was eating, he pulled the meat from his hand and addressed the bird:

"O poor one, you were set up as a trap, and then you were slaughtered, though they feared the consequences of their action."

He immediately discarded the meat and refused to eat any of it, stating that his soul should not be deprived of "Alawite light" or "heavenly rogue."

Animal Imagery and Stories in His Works

Al-Maʿarri's sympathy for animals appears frequently in his poetry and prose, especially in Risālat al-Ghufrān and Luzūmiyyāt.

He often used animal imagery to reflect the shared suffering of all living beings. Lions, deer, goats, eagles, falcons, and dogs appear in his verses—portrayed in moments of struggle and vulnerability.

His prose includes moral narratives involving animals, such as the shepherd who failed to protect his flock or the symbolic “death of a rabbit.”

In Risālat al-Ghufrān, animals appear as metaphors and even interlocutors. He references beliefs about reincarnation into animals—like bulls or camels—and imagines encounters in Paradise with creatures such as lions, rabbits, geese, and peacocks. These scenes challenge traditional notions of Heaven and reflect his broader ethical vision.

Al-Maʿarri’s compassion for animals was not a passing sentiment, it was a central pillar of his philosophy.

His rejection of violence, his ethical veganism, and his poetic reverence for nature all reveal a thinker who placed humanity and mercy above ritual and tradition.

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7 :Al-Maʿarri on Women and Slavery

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri, though known for his asceticism and philosophical pessimism, demonstrated deep moral consideration for both women and slaves—groups often marginalized in his time. His writings reflect a consistent ethical stance rooted in compassion, justice, and a rejection of worldly exploitation.

Al-Maʿarri and Women: Personal Life and Philosophical Stance

Al-Maʿarri never married. Biographers suggest this choice was influenced by his physical condition, he was blind and bore disfiguring marks from smallpox, as well as his broader worldview.

- Aversion to Marriage: His rejection of marriage aligned with his ascetic lifestyle and detachment from worldly desires.

- Pessimism and Antinatalism: Al-Maʿarri held an antinatalist view, believing that bringing children into a world of suffering was morally questionable.

His self-composed epitaph reads:

“This is my father's crime against me, which I myself committed against none.”

This perspective challenges traditional roles of women as childbearers, though it stems from compassion rather than condemnation.

Moral and Compassionate Views

Despite his rejection of marriage and procreation, Al-Maʿarri's ethical beliefs extended compassionately to motherhood.

- Respect for Mothers' Milk:

As a committed vegan, he instructed followers not to consume milk, writing:

"The white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young, not for noble ladies."

This reflects his reverence for maternal care and his opposition to exploitation.

Intercession for a Woman: Al-Maʿarri once broke his seclusion to intervene in a case of injustice involving a woman.

He traveled to Aleppo to petition Emir Ṣāliḥ ibn Mirdās for the release of notables who had destroyed a winehouse after its Christian owner was accused of molesting a Muslim woman. This rare public action underscores his moral commitment.

Depictions of Women in Literary Contexts

In Risālat al-Ghufrān and other poetic discussions, Al-Maʿarri references women in various capacities, spiritual, societal, and symbolic.

- Women in Poetry and Praise:

One verse attributed to him suggests a positive view of women's supportive role:

"If you ask me about women, I am on medication. Women are doctors."

- Respect for Royal Women:

In a narrative about the poet al-Nābigha, he avoids naming the queen's women in his poetry, showing deference to royal privacy.

- Piety Leading to Paradise:

He recounts the story of a woman in Paradise who had once been "one of the ugliest women of Aleppo" and divorced. She attained bliss through worship and spinning, affirming personal piety over social status.

- Holy Women in Heaven:

Revered figures such as Khadīja bint Khuwaylid appear in his Paradise narrative, described with honor and majesty.

Khadīja is said to have struggled with jealousy, and the Prophet prayed for her relief, humanizing her spiritual journey.

- **Houris and Nymphs:**

The narrative includes encounters with eternally beautiful nymphs (ḥūr), one of whom tells the traveler she was prepared for him before the world was created—reflecting classical Islamic imagery of Paradise.

- Effects of Calamity: In a dramatic resurrection scene, he references a verse where "every breastfeeding woman is astonished by what she breastfeeds and puts down her pregnancy," evoking the chaos of judgment day.

- Proverbial Context: An ancient proverb tells of a man who hated his wife. When she bore him a son and he tried to kiss the child, she broke his teeth—an allegory of justice and consequence.

Al-Maʿarri's Views on Slavery and Servitude

While Al-Maʿarri did not marry, he did have servants—likely including individuals who were technically slaves or former slaves, as was common in his time. His views on servitude, however, aligned with his broader philosophy of compassion and moral detachment.

Ethical Reflections on Slavery

- Compassion for the Exploited:

Al-Maʿarri extended his ethical concern to slaves and the oppressed, viewing their condition as another example of human injustice and suffering.

- The Burden of Servitude: He often lamented the harsh reality of servitude, describing all people as slaves in some sense, whether to their bodies, passions, or traditions.

"Do not own slaves! To be their masters is itself servitude."

This quote encapsulates his belief that controlling others diminishes the master's own freedom and moral standing.

Slavery as a Human Condition

Al-Maʿarri frequently used metaphors of slavery and captivity to express his deeply pessimistic worldview:

- Universal Captivity: He described himself as a "double prisoner"—blind and isolated.

- Bondage to Desire: He saw humans as enslaved by physical needs and emotions, writing:

"Slaves of their stomachs and prisoners of their feelings."

- Equality in Death: He emphasized the fleeting nature of life, stating:

"Nor king nor slave the hungry Days will spare."

This highlights the ultimate equality of all people in the face of mortality.

Personal Interactions with Servants

Despite his asceticism, Al-Maʿarri showed fairness and consideration toward those who served him:

Financial Support: He received an annual pension of thirty dinars and consistently divided it, half for his servant, half for his own modest needs.

Recognition of a Slave's Reward:

In Risālat al-Ghufrān, a man in Paradise identifies himself as "the black Tawfiq," a former servant in a Baghdad house of learning. He says:

"I was black and I have become otherwise,"

suggesting a transformation of status or being in the afterlife.

Domestic Language of Servitude:

In a quoted conversation, a man apologizing to his wife offers her control over his household, saying:

"The servant, your servant, and the money, your money."

Al-Maʿarri's reflections on women and slaves reveal a consistent moral philosophy: one that rejects exploitation, honors dignity, and sees all beings—regardless of status—as part of a shared human condition.

His asceticism was not isolationist, but ethical. His compassion was not sentimental, but principled.

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8 :Al-Maʿarri and Indian Thought

A Convergence of Ethics and Philosophy

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri was a man of profound intellect.

Though he became a radical skeptic and freethinker in his later writings, he remained a lifelong seeker of knowledge.

He studied Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, and was even accused in his later years of being influenced by Brahmanism.

While he famously declared that "religious people have no mind," this did not prevent him from engaging with and being affected by other religious traditions—including those he esteemed, such as Greek logic.

His persistent questioning of which religion holds the truth suggests that he explored many creeds and cults.

Based on his writings and lifestyle, there are several reasons to believe that Al-Maʿarri may have been influenced by Indian thought.

1. Asceticism, Veganism, and Accusations of Brahmanism

Al-Maʿarri's radical personal choices led to comparisons with Indian religious traditions:

- Veganism and Asceticism: He lived an austere life, renouncing worldly pleasures and practicing strict vegetarianism—eventually becoming one of the earliest known vegans.

He condemned the consumption of animal flesh and milk meant for offspring, writing:

"Do not unjustly eat what the water has given up… or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young."

- Accusation of Brahmanism: His refusal to eat meat led some contemporaries to accuse him of abandoning Islam and embracing Brahmanism, as vegetarianism was a known tenet of Brahminical practice.

- Indian Comparison: His lifestyle was directly compared to Indian ascetics of the time.

He also noted that Indians abstained from intoxicants because "they see him [wine] as denial," aligning with his own condemnation of alcohol, which he called "an unmitigated evil."

2. Philosophical Doctrines and Knowledge of Indian Beliefs

Al-Maʿarri showed awareness of doctrines commonly associated with Indian religions:

- Reincarnation (Tanasukh): He discussed reincarnation as an “ancient doctrine,” explicitly attributing its origin to “the people of India.” He also noted its presence among certain Shiite groups.

- Cremation: Al-Maʿarri supported cremation of the dead, writing in his epitaph that children should be spared the pain of life and advising people to walk gently, as the earth holds the remains of the dead. Cremation was explicitly linked to Hindu practice in his sources.

3. Geographical and Scholarly Connections

Though Al-Maʿarri spent his later years in seclusion in Maʿarra, he remained intellectually connected to the wider world:

- Students from India: Scholars and literary aspirants traveled from distant regions—including India—to study with him, bringing with them diverse philosophical ideas.

- Focus on Foreign Creeds: He critically examined Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. His detailed commentary on Magian rituals, such as washing with cattle urine (“staling of the kine”), shows his awareness of practices from the broader Persian-Indian cultural sphere.

Reason Over Tradition

While Al-Maʿarri is primarily remembered as a rationalist and skeptic who championed reason over dogma, his ethical alignment with Indian philosophy—especially its emphasis on nonviolence, asceticism, and spiritual detachment—was so strong that critics accused him of being a follower of Brahmanism.

He himself acknowledged that doctrines like reincarnation and vegetarianism originated with the people of India, suggesting not only awareness but possible admiration.

Evidence Supporting Al-Maʿarri’s Engagement with Indian Thought

1. Accusations and Ethical Parallels

One of the strongest indicators is the accusation made by Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201), a prominent historian and critic, who claimed that Al-Maʿarri's refusal to eat meat was a sign he had adopted Brahminism.

This accusation was echoed by others and reflects how extreme and unusual his ethical stance appeared within the Islamic world. His veganism—extending even to milk—was so radical that it was directly associated with Indian religious practice.

In his Luzūmiyyāt, Al-Maʿarri wrote:

"Be not eager to eat up the flesh of animals, / Or deem lawful the milk of mothers who designed its pure draught for their young."

This statement aligns closely with the principle of Ahimsa (nonviolence) found in Jainism and Hinduism, going beyond dietary restriction to express a deep ethical rejection of harm.

His ascetic lifestyle also drew comparisons to Indian ascetics. In Arabic literature, Indian philosophers were often grouped under the label of Zuhhād (ascetics), and Al-Maʿarri's extreme self-denial and seclusion fit this mold.

2. Textual Knowledge of Indian Doctrines

Al-Maʿarri demonstrated explicit awareness of doctrines uncommon in Abrahamic traditions.

He discussed the concept of Tanasukh (reincarnation) and directly attributed it to "the people of India." In one verse, he wrote:

"The transmigration of the soul to another body is what has been adopted by the Indians."

This shows not only familiarity with Indian metaphysics but also a willingness to engage with it philosophically.

He also expressed support for cremation, a practice associated with Hinduism.

His famous epitaph urges people to “walk gently on the earth,” suggesting that the soil contains the remains of the dead.

This reflects a worldview where the body returns to the elements—particularly fire—rather than being buried, a concept rooted in Indian traditions.

Al-Maʿarri also noted that Indians abstain from intoxicants because “they see him [wine] as denial,” which mirrors his own condemnation of alcohol. In his poetry, he frequently described wine as “an unmitigated evil.”

3. Transmission Mechanisms and Scholarly Contact

Even though Al-Maʿarri spent his later years in seclusion in Maʿarra, he remained intellectually connected to the broader world. During his lifetime, the Abbasid Caliphate—centered in Baghdad—was a hub of translation and philosophical exchange.

Indian, Persian, and Greek texts were actively translated and debated in scholarly circles. Al-Maʿarri, having spent time in Baghdad, absorbed this intellectual atmosphere.

Historical accounts confirm that students traveled from distant regions to study with him, including from Multan (in modern-day Pakistan), which was a center of Indian thought.

These visitors likely brought with them philosophical ideas from the Indian subcontinent, serving as a direct conduit to Al-Maʿarri’s secluded home.

He also demonstrated detailed knowledge of foreign creeds, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. His commentary on Magian rituals—such as washing with cattle urine—shows his awareness of practices from the broader Persian-Indian cultural sphere.

In conclusion, Al-Maʿarri’s extreme veganism, philosophical skepticism, discussion of reincarnation, and the accusations of Brahminism by his contemporaries all point to a meaningful engagement with Indian thought. Whether through direct study or cultural

transmission, his ethical and metaphysical ideas resonate strongly with traditions from the Indian subcontinent.

9: Abu al-Ala Al-Maʿarri’s on reason and doubt

The life and works of Abu al-Ala al-Maʿarri are deeply marked by philosophical engagement with skepticism, isolation, and the critical examination of established beliefs.

These themes align closely with the four categories presented in your query. He adopted a skeptical view, sometimes an atheistic view.

The Limits of Knowledge

Al-Maʿarri, while advocating for the supremacy of reason over tradition, was acutely aware of the limitations inherent in human intellect when seeking ultimate truths.

He portrayed the intellect as a powerful tool, yet often deficient and incapable when confronted with the great philosophical problems of existence.

He described the struggle of the intellect attempting to ascend to heavenly knowledge, only to be turned back.

Similarly, the intellect seeks to learn the truths of the stars and planets but remains unable to grasp all that it desires.

In moments of deepest reflection, Al-Maʿarri concluded that genuine certainty is unattainable, stating that the utmost effort of his diligence is merely

“to suppose and guess.”

His skepticism extended even to metaphysical issues, as the intellect struggled to comprehend the ultimate nature of God, leading him to describe his intellect as afflicted.

The path of the intellect, though offering guidance, is made difficult by the harsh realities of life and the nature of humanity.

He noted that the intellect sometimes proves unable to analyze or explain the tragic and unjust events of human life.

The Failure of Certainty

Al-Maʿarri is widely characterized as a skeptic and a controversial rationalist.

His mature works, particularly the Luzumiyat, are permeated by doubt and philosophical anxiety.

He openly questioned the foundational claims of major religions, asking:

"Which one of the religions is correct? "

He viewed religious differences as arising from mere human fabrication.

Al-Maʿarri lived in a constant state of internal conflict and uncertainty, unable to find comfort in either philosophical doctrines or religious dogma.

He believed that all claims of divine revelation should be rejected. He asserted that the sacred books contain only

"idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce."

He critiqued those who claimed definitive knowledge about the cosmos or the future, suggesting that their assertions regarding the stars and planets were based on mere superstition and conjecture.

The only truth he seemed certain of was the universality of uncertainty.

Even his intellectual rivals,philosophers and theologians often presented their conflicting views as mere suppositions formed after extensive deliberation.

The Loneliness of the Thinker

Al-Maʿarri famously described himself as a "double prisoner"—confined by both physical blindness and the isolation he chose.

Chosen Isolation: From around age 45, he lived in seclusion, embracing an ascetic lifestyle and rejecting offers of wealth and position.

He viewed solitude as the "greatest comfort."

Intellectual and Social Alienation: His physical confinement was intertwined with a profound sense of alienation from society, which he often viewed with contempt. His intellectual superiority and self-esteem further distanced him from the masses.

He felt misunderstood by those around him, stating:

“The companions at my side seek my speech, and I want my silence.”

His desire to return to his internal philosophical life was central to his self-imposed prison.

The psychological burden of his intellectual journey led him to believe that his philosophical views and moral rigor were intended primarily for himself.

He felt a vast, distant expanse separating him from others.

Questioning Tradition and Inherited Truths

A cornerstone of Al-Maʿarri’s philosophy was the necessity of reason guiding morality, asserting its superiority over entrenched traditions.

He explicitly warned against blindly following tradition, famously advising:

“*Do not say, if you come across something shameful, that this is the path the predecessors followed.”*

He challenged the concept of divine revelation, claiming that religion is a

“fable invented by the ancients,”

Valued only by those who seek to exploit the credulous masses.

He applied this skepticism to specific religious practices, such as the Hajj pilgrimage, which he criticized as “a pagan’s journey,” suggesting that the stones being visited were merely rocks given special status.

He synthesized his critique of dogmatism by stating that people are divided into two types: those who possess intellect but lack religion, and those who possess religion but lack intellect.

He questioned the motives of religious leaders, observing that many treated religion as a profitable livelihood, and that philosophical and theological disputes were often merely

“means to attract leaders.”

Al-Maʿarri's critical stance was so fierce that he did not spare even the prophets, viewing their reported statements as fabrications

Core Doubt and Skepticism

"My utmost diligence is merely to suppose and guess."

A confession that even rigorous thought leads only to uncertainty.

"*The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have—and indeed did—produce."*

Doubt in the authenticity and uniqueness of *sacred texts.*

"Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true; they are all fabrications."

A sweeping rejection of prophetic authority.

"The statements of the messengers are merely forgeries they inscribed, and they came and spoiled life with the impossible."

Doubt not only in truth but in the consequences of belief.

"The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts: those with brains but no religion, and those with religion but no brains."

A satirical division that questions the compatibility of reason and faith. Even modern thinkers like Richard Dawkins, who are outspoken critics of religion, tend to couch their arguments in scientific reasoning and rhetorical caution.

Al-Maʿarri, on the other hand, drops the veil entirely. His verse doesn't negotiate—it declares.

"Do not say, if you come across something shameful, that this is the path the predecessors followed."

A warning against blind tradition and inherited belief and condition.

"The deluded one purifies his body, but the body is only forged with filth and impurity."

Al-Maʿarri is challenging the symbolic meaning of bodily purity in religious practice.

He's essentially saying: Why purify something that is inherently impure?

The body, in his view, is a vessel of decay, filth, and suffering, so the act of washing it for spiritual reasons is misguided, even delusional.

“If a monk in his cloister or a devotee in his retreat had become a Magian or a Sabean, he would have followed that path.”

This refers to followers of Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion centered around fire worship and dualistic cosmology (good vs. evil). In Islamic literature, “Magian” often represents non-monotheistic belief or foreign ritualism.

Historically, in ancient Arabia: The ***Sabeans*** were a people of South Arabia who founded the kingdom of Saba, the biblical Sheba.

They were known for their wealth, trade in spices, and impressive engineering like the Ma'rib Dam. Their religion was polytheistic, with their main deity being Almaqah..

Proof of Al-Maʿarri’s Intellectual Circle and Exposure to Philosophy

Literary Salons in Baghdad:

During his time in Baghdad (early 11th century), Al-Maʿarri was well received in prestigious literary salons, where he interacted with leading poets and scholars of the Islamic Golden Age.

Hosting Scholars in Maʿarra:

After returning to his hometown, he lived in seclusion but hosted a salon where students, poets, and intellectuals gathered to read aloud and debate. This was essential since Al-Maʿarri was blind, he relied on others to read texts to him.

Exposure to Greek Philosophy:

According to historian Al-Qifti, Al-Maʿarri visited a Christian monastery near Latakia, where he listened to debates on Hellenistic philosophy.

These encounters likely influenced his secular and rationalist worldview.

Influence of Stoic and Greek Thinkers:

Scholars have noted that Al-Maʿarri’s ethical and philosophical ideas show traces of Greek logic, Stoicism, and even Epicurean skepticism, transmitted through Arabic translations of classical texts.

10:Introduction to The Epistle of Forgiveness

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri's Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness) stands as one of the most audacious and imaginative works of classical Arabic prose.

Written in A.H. 424 (around A.D. 1033), when Al-Maʿarri was sixty-three years old, the work is a direct response to the poet Ibn al-Qāriḥ (ʿAlī ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥalabī), whom Al-Maʿarri mocked for his religious hypocrisy and dogmatism.

Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness) by Abu al-Ala al-Maʿarri is a daring and imaginative journey through the afterlife, written in the 11th century.

Long before Dante penned his Divine Comedy, Al-Maʿarri envisioned a celestial voyage that blends satire, literary critique, and philosophical inquiry.

Structured as a fictional dialogue between the poet Ibn al-Qāriḥ and heavenly beings, the work explores Paradise and Hell, not to affirm religious doctrine, but to expose its contradictions.

Like Dante's descent into the Inferno, Al-Maʿarri's journey is populated by poets, scholars, and sinners whose fates provoke reflection on justice, hypocrisy, and the absurdity of inherited belief.

Yet where Dante seeks divine order, Al-Maʿarri leans into doubt. His afterlife is not a moral map but a philosophical labyrinth.

He mocks the idea that salvation is earned through ritual or reputation, and questions whether forgiveness itself is meaningful in a world governed by arbitrary truths.

Al-Maʿarri's tone is sharper, more ironic, and more skeptical than Dante's.

His Paradise is not a reward, it's a stage for satire. His Hell is not punishment—it's a mirror held up to human folly. Through poetic encounters and biting commentary, he dismantles the logic of divine justice and invites readers to think beyond dogma.

The idea that Risālat al-Ghufrān influenced Dante's Divine Comedy is intriguing, but not conclusively proven.

While both works share structural and thematic similarities—such as a journey through the afterlife, encounters with poets and sinners, and satirical commentary, the historical link between Al-Maʿarri and Dante remains speculative.

There's no direct evidence that Dante read Arabic texts or had access to Al-Maʿarri's work.

However, it's possible that ideas from the Islamic world, including philosophical and theological concepts, reached Europe through translation movements in Spain and Sicily.

Scholars like Miguel Asín Palacios have argued that Islamic eschatological literature may have shaped Dante's vision, but this remains a debated topic.

So while the resemblance is striking, especially in tone and structure, we should be careful not to overstate the connection. Instead, we can celebrate both works as masterpieces of their own traditions, each reflecting a deep engagement with the human condition, morality, and the limits of religious certainty.

The Epistle of Forgiveness: Visions of Heaven and Hell

The renowned prose work Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness) by Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri is widely recognized as a literary exploration of the afterlife. Its first volume is subtitled "A Vision of Heaven and Hell", and the second volume discusses "Hypocrites, Heretics, and Other Sinners", indicating that the fate of the damned is a central theme.

Descriptions of Torment and Suffering

Al-Maʿarri vividly describes the punishments endured by those in Hell. One striking example involves the poet Bashshar ibn Burd, who suffers agonizing torment:

"He does not keep silent except when the Zabāniyya (angels of torment) open his eyes with tongs of fire, so that he may look at the punishment that has befallen him."

Other passages evoke Hell's rebuke and the suffering of its inhabitants:

"The Fire rebuked them from below, concerning me."

"I do not blame the atheist, but a man who fears the Blazing Fire and is constantly afflicted."

Al-Maʿarri is saying:

He does not condemn the one who doubts or disbelieves, but rather pities the believer who lives in fear tormented not by sin, but by the idea of Hell itself.

Al-Maʿarri also quotes the Qur'anic verse: "...a chain whose length is seventy traverse ye it."

(Qur'an 69:32)

This verse is part of a vivid passage describing the punishment of the arrogant and disbelieving in the afterlife.

Al-Maʿarri often referenced such verses to reflect on divine justice, sometimes with irony or philosophical doubt.

In a philosophical reflection, he writes:

"The soul never despairs, even if the Law has set up the Fire for eternity."

Dialogue of the Damned

Drawing from religious texts, Al-Maʿarri includes desperate exchanges between the dwellers of Hell and those in Paradise:

-"The dwellers of the Fire call out to the dwellers of Paradise:

'Pour down upon us water or anything that God has provided you with...' Surely God has forbidden them (both water and provision) to the disbelievers."

This quote is drawn from the Qur'an, Surah Al-Aʿrāf (Chapter 7), Verse 50, and it depicts a moment of desperation and divine judgment in the afterlife.

Al-Maʿarri's Personal View on Salvation

Al-Maʿarri's pessimistic worldview often leads him to seek escape from Hell rather than reward in Paradise:

"May God honor me, and I do not aspire to Paradise, but to freedom from the Fire."

His philosophy includes the anti-natalist view:

"No children should be begotten, so as to spare them the pains of life.",

The Arabic text of Risālat al-Ghufrān and Al-Maʿarri's poetry contains direct and indirect references to Hell and eternal punishment:

- On Bashshar ibn Burd: "He does not keep silent except when the Zabāniyya open his eyes with tongs of fire."

Bashshar ibn Burd was a brilliant, provocative poet of the 8th century, blind from birth,

Persian by descent, and a master of Arabic verse.

He lived during the early Abbasid period and became famous (and infamous) for his satirical, sensual, and often irreverent poetry.

He challenged religious norms, mocked moral hypocrisy, and celebrated worldly pleasures with biting wit.

Why did Al-Maʿarri Mentioned Him in Risālat al-Ghufrān?

In The Epistle of Forgiveness, Al-Maʿarri places Bashshar in Hell, where he suffers torment at the hands of the Zabāniyya (angels of punishment).

One vivid scene describes Bashshar having his eyes forced open with tongs of fire so he can witness the punishment inflicted upon him.

On Khalaf ibn Umayya al-Juhmi, who threw himself into the Fire:

"When they try to escape, the flames sting them back, and they cry: 'You have done something monstrous! There is no god but God.'"

"The Fire rebuked them from below."

"Jahannam, its sparks and its flames, the transgressor will endure them."

The name "Jahannam" is an Arabic term for Hell in Islamic theology.

It appears frequently in the Qur'an and classical Arabic literature to describe the realm of divine punishment for sinners and disbelievers.

"The term 'Jahannam,' used throughout Islamic texts to describe Hell, is linguistically derived from the Hebrew Gehinnom is a valley near Jerusalem associated with punishment and purification in Jewish tradition.

Al-Maʿarri's use of the word reflects both its Qur'anic weight and its deeper historical resonance.

Philosophical Doubts and Warnings

Al-Maʿarri questions the fate of souls and the justice of divine reward:

“Has Nobakht dwelt in the Fire? And have the workers of Paradise truly earned it?”

Nawbakht ibn Yahya was a Persian astrologer and intellectual active during the early Abbasid period (8th century CE).He played a key role in the translation movement in Baghdad, helping bring Greek and Persian knowledge into Arabic

“Do you fear the Blazing Fire at the reckoning?”

“Your Lord did not pardon the defiant sinner, but He forgave the one who repented.”

“May God honor me, I do not hope for Paradise, but for freedom from the Fire.”

He saw religion as a system of fear and reward, and he wanted no part of it.

Eternal Punishment and Rejection of Ritual

Al-Maʿarri reflects on death and the threat of fire:

“Death follows with the threat of burning embers.”

“The Law has established the Fire for eternity, even if the soul does not despair.”

“I will do good as long as I can, but do not perform the funeral prayer over me when I perish.”

"I will do good as long as I can:

This part of the quote emphasizes Al-Ma'arri's belief in the importance of morality and ethics for its own sake, rather than for the promise of religious reward or the fear of punishment.

He is saying that his actions are guided by an innate sense of what is right, and he will strive to be virtuous simply because it is the correct way to live, not to earn a place in paradise..

This separates his morality from religious doctrine.

"but do not perform the funeral prayer over me when I perish"

This is the most defiant and controversial part of the statement. The funeral prayer (Salat al-Janazah) is a communal ritual in Islam performed to seek forgiveness and mercy for the deceased.

By requesting that this prayer not be performed for him, Al-Ma'arri is doing several things:

Rejecting religious ritual: He is publicly rejecting a core religious rite, showing his skepticism and disdain for formal religious practices.

Distancing himself from the community of believers:

The funeral prayer is a way for the community to show respect and solidarity with the deceased and their family.

Al-Ma'arri's request is a final act of separation from the religious community he felt was based on dogma and blind faith.

He swears: “I do not hope for eternal life in Paradise.”

So Al Ma’arri does not need fruits nor fire.

Paradise in Al-Maʿarri’s Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness)

Al-Maʿarri’s Risālat al-Ghufrān offers a vivid, ironic, and philosophical journey through the afterlife.

The narrator, Ibn al-Qāriḥ, explores Paradise and Hell, encountering poets, skeptics, and sinners in surreal dialogues. Paradise is not just a reward, it’s a stage for satire, reflection, and literary critique.

General Description and Environment

The central theme of Paradise involves discussing those who won forgiveness in the Last House.

“Paradise contains delicious fruits and trees.”

Each tree’s shadow is said to stretch

“the distance between the East and Morocco.”

“The righteous (the elite/immortalists) are found resting under these trees.”

“The inhabitants of Paradise do not experience death; they have victory and Saad (felicity).”

“The angels enter Paradise from every door of peace.”

Paradise is described as “an outcome of influential safety for imagination,” embraced when *“the realm of facts is too constrained.”*

One poet, Labid bin Rabie, praises a palace “described by the descriptions for a pyramid or a generosity.”

“Paradise knows no sickness or sorrow.”

Heaven “does not intimidate her sickness and does not go down with her silence.”

Rivers and Drinks of Paradise

Al-Maʿarri depends on the Qur’anic verses but he uses imagination.

He depends here on

“In it are rivers of water unaltered, rivers of milk whose taste never changes, rivers of wine delicious to those who drink, and rivers of purified honey.”

(Qur’an 47:15)

“There are collapses (rivers/streams) of non-teeth water.” (pure water)

“There are rivers of milk whose taste has not changed.”

“There are collapses from the wine of Lahd.”

This wine “heals a headache and does not harm it.”

“Rivers of wine are described as having fish playing in them.”

“There are collapses from filtered honey.”

This honey is “eternal food,” and “its food is described as lasting forever.”

“The honey is miraculously formed; while bees earned honey in the mortal world, here God simply commanded it to ‘Be, it was.’”

“Cups of drink are brought to the inhabitants by immortal newborns.”

Inhabitants and Eternal State

“God will compensate me so that I will live in immortality.”

This line expresses a hope or belief that God will reward the speaker with eternal life in Paradise. It’s not claiming that the man is immortal, but that he will be made immortal as a divine gift.

A man breaks open a fruit from the poplar tree, and a “ḥūriyyāt”

So one emerges, saying she was

“prepared for him before God created the world by four thousand years.”

He hints on the creation story.

“They view the torment of the wretched to glorify God's thanks for the blessings.”

Definition of ḥūriyyāt

Ḥūriyyāt (plural of ḥūr) are heavenly beings described in Islamic tradition as part of the reward for the righteous in Paradise.

They are often portrayed as companions of exceptional beauty, purity, and eternal youth.

The Qur’an refers to them as ḥūr ʿīn, which is commonly translated as “wide-eyed maidens,” symbolizing radiance and perfection.

Traditionally, they are imagined as female figures created specifically for the enjoyment and companionship of believers in the afterlife.

Modern Interpretations

Some contemporary Muslim scholars challenge the literal interpretation of ḥūriyyāt as physical women. They suggest:

The term ḥūr may be metaphorical, referring to states of purity, peace, or spiritual reward, rather than gendered beings.

The descriptions in the Qur’an are poetic and symbolic, designed to appeal to the imagination of early listeners, not to define the anatomy of Paradise.

Paradise transcends earthly categories like gender, desire, and physical form—so ḥūriyyāt may represent divine beauty or inner fulfillment, not sensual pleasure..

11.Al-Ma'arri's "Double Prison"

Al-Ma'arri famously described himself as a "double prisoner" of blindness and of his own home.

While the first is literal (he lost his sight at age four), the second is widely interpreted as metaphorical.

He chose a life of asceticism and intellectual solitude, not because he was physically confined, but because he rejected the world's hypocrisies, especially religious dogma and social vanity.

Evidence Supporting Normal Movement and Travel (Before 1010 CE).

Historical sources confirm several periods of significant movement and travel during Al-Maʿarri's early life, demonstrating that he was not physically confined by authorities during those years:

Educational Travel: Despite losing his eyesight at a young age due to smallpox,

Al-Maʿarri traveled to Aleppo to pursue his studies after beginning his education under his father.

He later continued his scholarly journey in Tripoli, Antioch, and other Syrian cities.

Travel to Baghdad: Following his father's death (around 1004–1005), Al-Maʿarri traveled to Baghdad, where he was warmly received in literary circles and composed several popular poems. He remained there for approximately eighteen months.

Return to Maʿarra: Around 1010 CE, he returned to his hometown of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān, motivated by concern for his mother's declining health.

Self-Designated "Prisoner"

Al-Maʿarri famously described himself as a "double prisoner".

A metaphor for his blindness and chosen isolation.

Ascetic Lifestyle: After returning to Maʿarra, he remained there for the rest of his life, embracing an ascetic lifestyle.

He lived in seclusion and refused to sell his literary works.

Continued Activity Despite Confinement: Despite his isolation, Al-Maʿarri remained intellectually active. He continued writing, enjoyed great respect in his community, attracted many students, and maintained correspondence with scholars abroad.

One Break in Confinement

His personal confinement was interrupted only once, when violence erupted in his town.

He traveled to Aleppo to intercede with the Mirdasid emir, Ṣāliḥ ibn Mirdās, to secure the release of his brother and other notable figures.

This episode confirms that his confinement was voluntary, as he was able to leave for a civic purpose when necessary.

Information on His Last Days

Al-Maʿarri died in May 1057 in his hometown of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān.

He was approximately eighty-three years old, having been wealthy and highly revered in his community during his seventies. He passed away while living a secluded, ascetic life.

The restriction on Al-Maʿarri's movement later in life was a matter of voluntary isolation, rooted in his ascetic philosophy, not forced imprisonment by authorities.

His earlier travels to Aleppo, Tripoli, Antioch, and Baghdad, along with his ability to leave his home to intercede for his brother, support the conclusion that he moved freely when he wished or needed to, and was not subjected to continuous, involuntary confinement.

The Unbending Poet: Al-Ma'arri in Baghdad

In the heart of bustling Baghdad, the city of a thousand scholarly salons and glittering intellects, a single lamplit chamber held the fate of a poet's reputation.

It was a grand gathering hosted by the influential al-Sharif Al-Murtaza, a man whose power was as vast as his library. Not merely a poet,

Al-Murtada was a jurist, a patron, and an intellectual force whose approval could elevate a career, and whose disdain could bury one.

Among the guests stood a figure who seemed out of place yet commanded quiet reverence:

Abu al-‘Ala al-Ma’arri, the blind poet from Ma’arrat al-Nu‘man.

His fame had traveled ahead of him.

Whispers filled the room of his unmatched erudition, his biting verses, and his stubborn refusal to flatter kings or compromise truth.

That night, Al-Murtada sought to settle an old score. He began reciting verses aimed at belittling his long-deceased rival, the legendary Al-Mutanabbi.

His voice rang with authority, weaving subtle and scathing critiques.

The room responded in kind, nods of agreement, murmurs of approval, a chorus of sycophants eager to please.

Then came the moment. Al-Murtada turned to Al-Ma’arri, his gaze sharp with expectation.

The message was unspoken but unmistakable: Join me. Condemn him. Show your loyalty.

But Al-Ma’arri did not move.

His sightless eyes faced forward, his posture unshaken. The room held its breath.

When he finally spoke, it was not with flattery or submission. His voice was calm, deliberate, and unwavering.

He praised Al-Mutanabbi’s genius, his mastery of language, and the enduring brilliance of his poetry.

He refused to tarnish the name of a poet he admired, no matter the cost.

The room fell into stunned silence. Al-Murtada’s face darkened.

His authority had been challenged, his stage disrupted by a man who could not even see the faces around him. In a flash of fury, he ordered Al-Ma’arri to be expelled.

Al-Ma’arri did not protest. He simply turned and walked out into the Baghdad night, his dignity intact, his principles unshaken.

A Testament to Integrity and Movement.

This story, passed down through generations, is more than a tale of poetic defiance, it is proof of Al-Ma’arri’s moral fortitude.

He could not be bought, bullied, or coaxed into betraying his convictions. His loyalty was to truth, not power.

It also quietly refutes the myth that Al-Ma’arri never left his hometown.

His presence in Baghdad, his participation in elite literary circles, and his confrontation with Al-Murtada all confirm that he did travel and engage with the intellectual world, at least during the earlier chapters of his life. His eventual retreat into solitude was a choice, not a lifelong condition.

The Church Encounter: A Broader Intellectual Curiosity

Though less documented, stories of Al-Ma'arri visiting a church and engaging with Christian theology further support the metaphor.

He was not confined by geography or ideology, he explored diverse intellectual terrains. This openness contrasts with his later retreat, suggesting his "prison" was a philosophical stance, not a physical one.

How did Al Ma’arri survive persecution?

Al-Maʿarri’s life: how did a man who openly criticized religious dogma, questioned divine justice, and mocked paradise avoid persecution or imprisonment?

Here’s what scholars believe:

Reputation and Respect

Al-Maʿarri was widely respected as a brilliant poet, philosopher, and scholar.

His intellectual stature gave him a kind of social immunity.

Even if people disagreed with his ideas, they admired his talent and moral integrity.

He was known for his ascetic lifestyle, refusing wealth, fame, and even the sale of his own writings.

His personal humility and refusal to seek power made him less threatening to rulers.

Protection by Local Nobility

While there's no direct evidence of a formal patronage, it's likely that local rulers and elites tolerated or even quietly supported him:

He lived in Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān, a relatively small town, not a political hotspot.

When violence broke out, he was able to travel to Aleppo and intercede with the Mirdasid emir, Ṣāliḥ ibn Mirdās, to free his brother and others. That suggests he had access to power and was trusted.

Strategic Expression

Al-Maʿarri was bold, but he was also subtle. His critiques were often wrapped in:

Poetry and allegory (like Risālat al-Ghufrān)

Philosophical riddles and satire

Classical Arabic eloquence, which made his work harder to attack directly

He didn't preach rebellion, he invited reflection. That made him harder to silence.

Voluntary Isolation

He chose to live as a "double prisoner"—blind and secluded. This self-imposed confinement may have shielded him from political danger, as he wasn't seen as a public agitator.

Al-Maʿarri's survival wasn't luck, it was a mix of genius, restraint, and respect.

He walked a razor's edge between truth and safety, and somehow, he never fell.

12: Al-Maʿarri:Muslim Thinker or Literary Heretic?

Al-Maʿarri's early and later works are both fluent and profound, but the change in his thought is stark.

In his early writings, he appears as a traditional Muslim scholar.

If you read those texts, you'll find clear evidence of his religious background, he praises the Prophet Muhammad and recounts the stories of other prophets as historical truth.

However, in his later works, especially The Luzūmiyyāt and The Epistle of Forgiveness, his tone shifts dramatically.

He begins to describe religious narratives as fables and openly expresses doubt about prophecy.

His intellectual journey ultimately led him to lose faith in organized religion.

He seems closer to a deist than an atheist, believing in a creator but rejecting religious institutions.

This evolution explains why some Muslims still consider him one of their own, while others label him a heretic.

Much depends on which phase of his writing one is reading.

For Al-Maʿarri, doubt became his faith, a philosophical stance rooted in reason and skepticism.

Fortunately, some of his works survived, unlike those of Al-Rawandi, the famous atheist.

Al-Rawandi wrote many books, but none of his original texts remain. What we know of him comes only from the responses of Muslim scholars who criticized his ideas.

It was very hard for me to find a version of Risālat al-Ghufrān that included the full description of Paradise. Many editions had altered, softened, or removed those passages entirely.

I. Why Paradise Is Hard to Pin Down in Risālat al-Ghufrān

The Epistle of Forgiveness (Risālat al-Ghufrān) is a remarkable prose work written by Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri as a direct response to the poet Ibn al-Qāriḥ, mocking his religious views.

The text follows a fictional journey through the afterlife, where the narrator encounters deceased poets and debates their eligibility for Paradise.

Reasons Why Paradise Descriptions Are Difficult to Find:

1. Focus on Forgiveness and Debate

The central theme is divine forgiveness, not topographical detail.

The narrative revolves around who deserves mercy and who does not.

2. Literary and Theological Dialogue

Much of the text consists of philosophical conversations with the dead, often debating whether their poetry qualified them for salvation.

This structure has drawn comparisons to Dante's Divine Comedy.

3. Allegorical Imagery of Paradise

Paradise is described using Qur'anic references and poetic flourishes:

- Rivers of water, milk, wine, and honey
- Trees casting shadows from the East to Morocco
- Palaces inscribed with names
- Eternal dwellings untouched by monuments

4. Authorial Intent

Al-Maʿarri, disillusioned with the material world, used the afterlife as a canvas for satire and philosophical reflection.

His Paradise is not a literal map,it's a literary device.

II. Why Some Muslim Scholars Still Consider Al-Maʿarri a Believer

Despite his famously skeptical tone, many Muslim scholars, both classical and modern, have argued that Al-Maʿarri was a Muslim.

This belief is rooted in context, interpretation, and the evolution of his legacy.

1. Controversial Beliefs and Accusations

Al-Maʿarri was known for his anti-dogmatic worldview:

He called religion “a fable invented by the ancients”

Criticized rituals like Hajj, calling it “a pagan’s journey”

Encouraged reason over tradition

Famously said: “The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts: those with brains but no religion, and those with religion but no brains”

These views led to accusations of atheism and heresy, sometimes mockingly referred to as “hazelnuts” in the text.

2.

Misinterpretation and Defense

Critics often misunderstood his philosophical complexity.

Some falsely attributed sayings to him.

Others actively tried to acquit him of atheism, suggesting he was misunderstood or misrepresented.

3. Textual Alteration and Loss

Many of his works were lost, corrupted, or edited—especially the controversial ones.

Sources noted that a printer was “embarrassed” by the demands of publishing Luzūmiyyāt, leading to errors.

Risālat al-Ghufrān itself includes debates over misattributed verses, showing how literary history can be distorted.

4. Posthumous Reinterpretation

Al-Maʿarri’s later reverence may have motivated efforts to reshape his image.

Some tried to portray him as a pious figure who merely used satire.

The desire to “save” pre-Islamic poets like Zuhayr and ʿUbayd by placing them in Paradise reflects a broader impulse to reinterpret literary figures within a religious framework.

Al-Maʿarri’s legacy is a battleground of interpretation. Muslim scholars who defend his faith often emphasize:

- His use of Qur’anic language

- His ascetic lifestyle

- The theme of divine forgiveness in Risālat al-Ghufrān

Meanwhile, critics point to his biting skepticism and philosophical rebellion.

The truth may lie somewhere in between—a man of faith and doubt, reason and poetry, who refused to be easily defined.

Another important reason that may make Muslim scholar think he is a Muslim :

Lifestyle as Evidence of Faith

Many Muslim scholars point to Al-Maʿarri’s ascetic way of life as proof of his Islamic identity:

He avoided alcohol, which is forbidden in Islam, and refused to own women slaves, even though it was common in his time. He also practiced celibacy, lived in seclusion, and rejected material wealth.

He never sold his poetry, choosing principle over profit.

These choices align with the image of a Sufi-like philosopher, someone devoted to purity, simplicity, and moral discipline.

Language and Devotion

In his poetry and prose, Al-Maʿarri frequently used the word “Allah”, and referenced:

- Qur’anic verses

- Islamic concepts like ghufrān (forgiveness)

- Prophetic traditions and religious figures

Even when he was being ironic or critical, his language was deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. This made it easier for later scholars to reinterpret his skepticism as internal critique, not rejection.

The Paradox

Al-Maʿarri lived like a saint, wrote like a skeptic, and spoke like a believer. That's why:

Some call him a Muslim philosopher.

Others call him a freethinker in disguise.

And some say he was both.

Many Islamic scholars labeled him a kāfir (infidel) or heretic

On the other hand, accusations that Al-Maʿarri was an atheist, or more accurately, a deist or freethinker, came from both his contemporaries and later scholars who studied his work.

His sharp critiques of religious dogma, rejection of superstition, and emphasis on reason over revelation led many to label him a kāfir (infidel) or heretic.

Contemporary and Near-Contemporary Scholars

Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201 AD): This well-known Arab jurist and historian, writing about a century after Al-Ma'arri's death, is a key source for this viewpoint. He explicitly stated that

"Men of Knowledge have said he was a heretic and an atheist, which clearly shows in his words and his verse." Ibn al-Jawzi's work,

The Orderly Book on the Histories of Nations and Kings, is a critical historical source for the accusations against Al-Ma'arri.

The Charges of Zindiq:

Al-Ma'arri was often labeled a zindiq. In the medieval Islamic context, this term had a broad meaning, ranging from a religious heretic to an outright atheist, often someone who secretly held different beliefs. The fact that this label was widely applied to him by

his contemporaries indicates that his views were seen as a direct challenge to mainstream Islamic theology.

Reasons and Specific Writings

The arguments for his atheism or skepticism come directly from his works, particularly his later poems. You can cite these as the "source" of the accusations.

Luzumiyyat (The Unnecessary Necessities): This collection of poetry is a primary source for the accusations against him

In these verses, he expresses deep skepticism about religious dogmas and practices. For example, he wrote:

"The inhabitants of the earth are of two sorts: those with brains, but no religion, and those with religion, but no brains." This famous couplet is a direct and blunt criticism of organized religion.

He also ridiculed the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), calling it a "pagan's journey."

He famously stated, "Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true; they are all fabrications. Men lived comfortably till they came and spoiled life."

Risalat al-Ghufran (The Epistle of Forgiveness): This satirical work, which takes the reader on a journey to paradise and hell, includes pre-Islamic poets in heaven.

This was highly controversial, as it suggests that non-Muslims could be saved, a view that contradicted the mainstream Islamic belief that only believers would enter paradise.

Modern Scholars and Interpretations

Many modern scholars, while not necessarily endorsing the medieval accusations, acknowledge and analyze the skepticism in his work.

They often categorize him as a "freethinker," "deist," or "skeptic," rather than a strict atheist in the modern sense, because his poetry often speaks of a universal "reason" or a higher moral force, even if he rejected specific religious doctrines.

Even in death, Al-Maʿarri’s voice was feared

In 2013, extremist militants reportedly beheaded his statue, accusing him of heresy and atheism. The irony? He had already described himself as a “double prisoner”—blind and isolated—and now, centuries later, even his stone likeness was silenced.

This act wasn’t just vandalism, it was a symbolic rejection of freethought, poetry, and philosophical dissent.

It shows how Al-Maʿarri’s ideas still provoke strong reactions, especially in times of ideological extremism.

Even in death, Al-Maʿarri’s voice was feared. His statue, erected in his hometown, was decapitated during the Syrian war—an act that mirrored the accusations of heresy he faced in life.

Yet the destruction only proves his enduring power: a poet whose words could not be silenced, even by stone.

13: Against Revelation

Al-Maʿarri’s Critique of Religion

Al-Maʿarri’s rejection of religious dogma was rooted in logic, not hatred. He saw rituals as distractions, prophets as storytellers, and salvation as a myth shaped by geography. Whether criticizing the Hajj or the schools of Israel, his message was clear: truth belongs to reason, not tradition.

Al-Ma'arri's Critique of Christianity: A Rationalist Rejection of Dogma

Al-Ma'arri’s criticisms of Christianity—like his critiques of Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism—stem from his broader rationalist and skeptical worldview, which rejected organized religion and dogma. His stance was not directed at any single faith but rather at the concept of religion as a whole, which he viewed as a tool for control and exploitation.

I. Rejection of Dogma and Divine Claims

Al-Ma'arri held secularist views that encompassed all major religions, including Christianity and Judaism. He believed religion was essentially a childish tale, feeble and fabricated, used by the powerful to manipulate the credulous masses.

On the Status of Christ

Al-Ma'arri opposed the elevation of Jesus to divine status, particularly the title “Lord of Glory.”

His critique is reflected in a verse (likely from the Quran, used rhetorically) where God asks Jesus whether he instructed people to worship him and his mother as deities besides God.

This illustrates Al-Ma'arri’s rejection of divine claims made by religious figures.

On Religious Adherence as Geographic Accident

Al-Ma'arri argued that religious belief was often a matter of geographic and cultural luck, not divine truth.

He remarked that monks in their cloisters or devotees in secluded locations might just as easily have become Magians or Sabians had they been born elsewhere. This underscores his view that religious identity is shaped more by environment than by revelation

II. Context and Study of Christianity

Al-Ma'arri had opportunities to study and debate Christian beliefs, especially during his travels to cities like Aleppo, Tripoli, and Antioch.

These interactions deepened his understanding of Christian doctrine and allowed him to engage in theological discussions.

In Risalat al-Ghufran, one fictional character “Ibn al-Qarih” states he was “on the religion of Christ” before the Prophet Muhammad was sent, reflecting Al-Ma'arri’s awareness of Christian traditions and their historical context.

I**bn al-Qarih**, a fictional figure in Al-Ma'arri's satirical work, Risalat al-Ghufran (The Epistle of Forgiveness).

In the story, Ibn al-Qarih tells Al-Ma'arri that he was a Christian before the advent of Islam, meaning he followed "the religion of Christ." He explains that his journey was not straightforward; he had previously been a believer in Zoroastrianism and had also followed the tenets of ancient Greek philosophers.

As for what God did to him, the story is satirical. Ibn al-Qarih is granted forgiveness and enters Paradise.

However, Al-Ma'arri's depiction of this is a clever literary device. Instead of being forgiven for his supposed conversion from Christianity to Islam, the character is seemingly forgiven for all his religious deviations.

The satire lies in the fact that he's in Paradise despite his complicated, and at times heretical, spiritual journey. This allows Al-Ma'arri to include pre-Islamic poets and figures in Paradise and to critique the traditional Islamic views on salvation and faith.

The character's presence in Paradise, therefore, is not a literal divine reward but a literary one, used by Al-Ma'arri to challenge religious dogma and the concept that only Muslims can enter Heaven.

III. Historical References

Al-Ma'arri demonstrated familiarity with Christianity's presence in the Arabian Peninsula. He referenced the people of Najran and the persecution they faced under Dhu Nuwas, who, following the religion of the Sabbath people, ordered the burning of Ahl al-Ukhdood, followers of the Gospel of Jesus.

He also mentioned historical figures such as King Justinus and Eleshbaas (Elasbaas), noting their roles in regional conflicts and their support for Christians, possibly in relation to events in Yemen.

While Al-Ma'arri's critiques of Christianity are embedded within his broader rejection of religious dogma, his secularist stance is clear in this quote:

"Monks in their cloisters or devotees in secluded locations would have become Magians or Sabians."

This statement encapsulates his belief that religious identity is arbitrary and shaped by circumstance, not divine truth.

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri as a Critic of Judaism and Organized Religion,

Al-Maʿarri was known as a controversial rationalist—a "pessimistic freethinker"—who rejected superstition and dogmatism.

His secularist views explicitly targeted both Judaism and Christianity, alongside his critiques of Islam.

He is famously quoted expressing extreme skepticism about religious claims:

"Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true; they are all fabrications."

Al-Maʿarri rhetorically questioned whether he should follow the Jewish path, implying dissatisfaction with their practices and beliefs—similar to his critiques of other faiths. He wrote that he found fault with:

“many of their deeds and sayings, just as he did with Christians and Muslims."

A specific verse attributed to him critiques the practice of learning within the tradition of the Children of Israel (likely referencing Jewish theological study), suggesting its futility:

“And all of Israel went to their schools reciting, But all that they studied is impossible.”

During his time in Tripoli and Latakia, Al-Maʿarri’s interactions with Christians and Jews intensified, leading him to study their religious traditions more closely.

Other Mentions Related to Conflict or Belief

Dhu Nuwās, a historical figure who persecuted the companions of the Sabbath, a term referring to Jews. In a philosophical discussion on transmigration (tanasukh)

Al-Maʿarri satirically mentions Jewish beliefs regarding metamorphosis ()

Who is Dhu Nuwās

?

Dhu Nuwas (full name Yūsuf Asʾar Yathʾar) was a Jewish king of the Himyarite kingdom, which was located in what is now Yemen.

He was a Jewish king who ruled the Himyarite kingdom between approximately 522 and 530 AD.

He was a convert to Judaism and was known by the name Dhu Nuwas, which means "he of the sidelocks," a reference to his hairstyle.

Persecution of Christians: He is widely known for his persecution of Christians, which is mentioned in the context.

He attacked the Christian city of Najran and its inhabitants. According to accounts, he gave the Christians the choice to convert to Judaism or face death.

When they refused, he reportedly massacred them, famously by throwing them into fiery ditches.

This event is what is referred to as "the burning of Ahl al-Ukhdood" (the people of the ditch).

His actions led to a swift and powerful response.

The Christians appealed for help to the Byzantine emperor, who in turn arranged for an army from the Christian kingdom of Aksum (in modern-day Ethiopia) to intervene.

The Aksumite forces invaded and defeated Dhu Nuwas.

Death: According to tradition, Dhu Nuwas chose to commit suicide by riding his horse into the Red Sea rather than be captured..

Why Al-Maʿarri Mentioned Dhu Nuwas

- Critique of Religious Dogma: Al-Maʿarri uses the story of Dhu Nuwas, a Jewish king who persecuted Christians, to expose the violent extremes of organized religion. This reflects his belief that religions are “fables invented by the ancients,” used to manipulate the masses.

- Arbitrariness of Belief: The Najran martyrs illustrate Al-Maʿarri’s view that faith is often shaped by birth and geography, not divine truth. People die for beliefs they inherited, while others kill for theirs.

- Questioning Salvation: In Risālat al-Ghufrān,

Al-Maʿarri includes characters with mixed religious backgrounds to challenge the idea that salvation belongs to one faith. He uses figures like Dhu Nuwas to argue that no religion holds exclusive truth.

Al Ma’arri refers to historical figures who interacted with or opposed Jewish communities, including:

A Jewish opponent of the Prophet.

A man from the Jews of Banī Khaybar.

-The concept of conversion to Judaism () is mentioned alongside conversion to Christianity, Magianism, and Hanifism—suggesting his view of all religious paths as equally questionable.

The criticism of Islam

The criticism of Islam in Al-Maʿarri's work takes the lion's share, unsurprisingly, given that he was born and raised in a Muslim society.

Islam was not just his inherited faith; it was the dominant religion shaping his life, culture, and the people around him.

This proximity made his critiques sharper, more direct, and more dangerous. As with many thinkers, the religion closest to home often receives the most scrutiny.

You won't find Christopher Hitchens criticizing Buddhism with the same intensity as Christianity, because Christianity was the system that shaped his world. Likewise,

Al-Maʿarri's philosophical rebellion was aimed at the faith that governed his own.

Al-Maʿarri's Critique of Hajj: Ritual, Reason, and Rebellion

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri lived during the later Abbasid era, a time when Islamic culture and religious practice dominated intellectual life. Despite this environment, he emerged as a controversial rationalist—a poet-philosopher who challenged inherited dogma and questioned the spiritual value of religious rituals.

Among his most pointed critiques was his rejection of the Hajj pilgrimage, which he saw not as a sacred journey, but as a hollow tradition rooted in pre-Islamic customs.

I. Philosophical Rejection of the Pilgrimage

Al-Maʿarri's disdain for Hajj is central to his broader rejection of blind faith. In his Luzūmiyyāt, he famously called Hajj:

"A pagan's journey."

He viewed the circling of the Kaaba and the ritual stoning of the Devil as remnants of ancient superstition, devoid of rational or spiritual substance. In another verse, he condemned the pilgrimage's social cost:

"A pilgrimage to the House (Kaaba)? Beware!

For starving relatives befoul the air,

And curse, O fool, the threshold you forsake."

This quote reveals his belief that true piety lies in compassion and charity, not in expensive journeys that neglect the suffering of one's own community. His critique also touches on the physical and social risks of mass religious gatherings, suggesting that Hajj is not the pure, divine event it claims to be, but a chaotic spectacle that exposes hypocrisy.

II. Satirical Imagery in Risālat al-Ghufrān

In Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness), Al-Maʿarri continues his critique through allegory and satire. The narrator's journey through the afterlife includes poetic references to Hajj and its sacred geography, often with ironic undertones.

1. Pilgrims and Oaths

The poet Al-Zubaiani, speaking in Paradise, swears by the age of those who have performed Hajj:

"Did you not hear my saying, not for the age of the one who has visited Hajj pilgrims."

Other verses evoke Mecca and the Kaaba in surreal, fragmented imagery:

"…the turbans of the pilgrims raise the soil."

"The paradise knows this between the bottom and the pilgrims."

These lines blur the boundary between sacred ritual and poetic absurdity, reinforcing Al-Maʿarri's skepticism.

2. Arafat and the Day of Resurrection

One character, facing the horrors of Yawm al-Qiyāmah (Day of Resurrection), seeks salvation through intercession at Arafat:

"The customers pulled me to Saqr [Hell]

/ I went to a man in Arafat

/ The hills of the moon and the people chant it from Club, oh

/ Muhammad, Muhammad."

This scene mimics the traditional chanting at Arafat during Hajj, but in Al-Maʿarri's hands, it becomes a satirical echo, a critique of ritualized salvation and the idea of divine mercy.

14:Introduction to Luzūm mā lam yalzam (The Luzūmīyāt)

Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri's Luzūm mā lam yalzam, also known as the Luzūmīyāt or simply Necessities, stands as one of the most intellectually demanding and philosophically rich collections in classical Arabic poetry.

The title, which translates to Unnecessary Necessity, reflects both the poet's worldview and his deliberate choice to impose complex rhyme schemes—restrictions that were not required, yet rigorously followed.

Composed after his earlier work Saqṭ az-Zand (The Tinder Spark), the Luzūmīyāt marks a turning point in Arabic literature. It is divided into five parts and is often compared to a Diwan in scale and ambition.

The work is sometimes referred to as the "book of obligatory women," a curious alternative title that hints at its layered linguistic play.

Philosophically, the Luzūmīyāt sets a serious path for Arabic poetry, weaving together Al-Maʿarri's personal ethics, social critiques, and reflections on universal themes such

as death, resurrection, and the afterlife. These motifs reappear throughout the collection in varied forms, often cloaked in metaphor and irony.

Yet the work's brilliance is matched by its difficulty

. Al-Maʿarri's use of obscure proverbs, historical allusions, and intricate language makes it challenging even for advanced readers. It's said that only a small fraction of its audience truly grasped its depth. Recognizing this, scholar Kamel

Al-Afandi Kilani later summarized the collection to make its ideas more accessible, stripping away some of the linguistic density while preserving its philosophical core.

Importantly, the Luzūmīyāt lays the groundwork for Al-Maʿarri's later prose masterpiece, Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness).

Many of the theological and existential questions explored in that satirical journey through the afterlife were first developed in the verses of Luzūm mā lam .

Summary of The Luzūmiyyāt

Luzūm mā lam ("The Necessity of What Is Unnecessary") is one of the major poetic works of Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri, written in the 11th century.

Known for its philosophical depth and linguistic complexity, the collection reflects Al-Maʿarri's radical rationalism and ascetic worldview.

Structure and Style

The title refers to Al-Maʿarri's self-imposed poetic constraint: a deliberately intricate rhyme scheme that exceeded traditional norms. This formal rigor mirrors his intellectual discipline and serves as a metaphor for his philosophical stance—choosing difficulty over ease, principle over conformity.

Core Themes

The Luzūmiyyāt is marked by a somber, earnest tone and explores:

- Supremacy of Reason: Al-Maʿarri elevates reason as the only true guide, rejecting superstition and inherited dogma.

- Critique of Religion: He attacks religious institutions across Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism,

- Pessimism and Isolation: Reflecting his blindness and voluntary seclusion, he calls himself a "double prisoner"—trapped by body and circumstance.

- Social and Moral Critique: The poems denounce tyranny, hypocrisy, and corruption, offering a vivid portrait of moral decay.

- Ethics and Vegetarianism: Al-Maʿarri advocates nonviolence and condemns animal slaughter, aligning his ethics with compassion and justice.

Connection to Risālat al-Ghufrān

Many ideas in The Luzūmiyyāt—especially those concerning resurrection and salvation—are later expanded in his prose masterpiece Risālat al-Ghufrān. Together, they form a unified philosophical vision: one that questions authority, defies convention, and seeks truth through doubt.

15: Al-Maʿarri on Death in the Luzūmiyyāt – back to atoms

When Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri permanently returned to Maʿarra in 1010 A.D., he was approximately 36 or 37 years old. From that point until his death in May 1057, he lived in seclusion, dictating his works and developing the philosophical poetry that would become the Luzūm mā lā yalzam (Luzūmiyyāt).

This major period of writing spanned nearly 47 years, and it produced some of the most profound meditations on death in Arabic literature.

In the Luzūmiyyāt, death is not portrayed as a transition to another realm, but as a definitive end to suffering—a release from the flawed and painful condition of existence.

Al-Maʿarri's reflections on death are shaped by his skepticism, asceticism, and antinatalist philosophy.

1. Death as the Cure for Life's Pain

Al-Maʿarri viewed life as a chronic affliction, and death as the only true remedy:

"That Death is a good supreme and gives to the body peace / From all sorrow — prove it thus: the way thereunto is hard."

"Life is a painful malady, and Death — he comes to cure its pain."

He often expressed weariness with existence:

"O Death! be thou my guest: I am tired of living."

And he saw the end of life as its greatest reward:

"No sooner a man is born than straightway his death becomes, / What fortune he gains, the grandest of gifts to him."

2. Death as the Only Certainty

In contrast to religious dogma, Al-Maʿarri treated death and decay as the only undeniable truths:

"The Grave and Cradle, the untiring twain, / Who in the markets of this narrow lane / Bordered of darkness, ever give and take / In equal measure—what's the loss or gain?"

"O leveling Death! to thee a rich man is like a poor, / Thou car'st not that one hath hit the right way, another missed."

"Nor glory nor dishonour sundereth / Moses and Pharaoh in the hour of death."

He emphasized the body's inevitable return to its elemental origins:

"Man of the soil and sun, / And to the soil and sun he shall return."

3**. Skepticism and the Unknowable Secret**

While death is certain, Al-Maʿarri remained agnostic about what lies beyond:

"Why try to con the book of earth and sky, / Why seek the truth which neither you nor I / Can grasp? But Death methinks the secret keeps, / And will impart it to us by and by."

He doubted the promise of resurrection:

-"Death’s debt is then and there / Paid down by dying men; / But ’tis a promise bare / That they shall rise again."

And he mocked the idea of bodily restoration:

"But it became parts divided, and then atoms of dust ever / Being swept away in the wind-blasts."

4. Death and Antinatalism

Al-Maʿarri’s pessimism led him to embrace antinatalism, viewing non-existence as preferable to life:

"My sire brought this on me, but I have none."

(His self-composed epitaph)

"And I gave peace to my children, for they are in the bliss of non-existence which surpasses all the pleasures of this world."

Al-Maʿarri’s poetry on death is not merely mournful—it is philosophical, defiant, and deeply humane. He saw death not as a punishment or a mystery, but as the final mercy granted to all living beings. His verses continue to resonate with readers who seek meaning beyond dogma and solace beyond suffering.

Belief in the Afterlife as a Mirror of Religion

It is often said that if you truly understand a person’s view of the afterlife, you understand their religion.

The afterlife is not just a theological endpoint, it is a mirror of a person’s deepest convictions, fears, and hopes.

For most believers, it reflects the moral architecture of their faith: Heaven and Hell, karma and rebirth, resurrection and judgment.

But Al-Maʿarri defies this pattern.

Though born into Islam and educated by Muslim scholars, his writings on death reveal a mind that had wandered far beyond the boundaries of any single creed.

He rejected the promise of resurrection, mocked religious dogma, and described death not as a transition but as a return, to atoms, to silence, to nonexistence.

This radical view suggests that Al-Maʿarri's true religion was not Islam, Christianity, or Zoroastrianism—but reason.

His afterlife was not populated by angels or flames, but by unanswered questions and elemental truths.

In this sense, his poetry becomes a kind of spiritual autobiography: a record of a man who searched every creed and found peace only in doubt.

16: The Epistemology of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri

Reason, Doubt, and Dissent

The epistemology of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri, as derived from The Meditations of Maʿarri and excerpts from Risālat al-Ghufrān, is fundamentally rooted in rationalism and profound skepticism.

He positions reason as the ultimate authority and views tradition as inherently unreliable.

Al-Maʿarri's worldview dictates that true knowledge is elusive—but if attainable, it must be sought through rigorous individual reflection, divorced from religious or societal dogma.

1. The Primacy and Authority of Reason

Al-Maʿarri asserts that reason (ʿaql) is the only reliable guide for humanity, holding a privileged position over tradition and superstition.

- Reason as the True Prophet: He elevates individual reason above all other forms of guidance, including divine messengers:

"O Reason, thou (alone) speakest the truth. Then perish the fools who forged the (religious) traditions or interpreted them!"

"Of all the conferences, Reason best will counsel and guide."

"O credulous man, if thou art endowed with understanding, consult it; for every understanding is a prophet."

- Reason as the Source of Virtue and Knowledge: He posits that moral excellence arises from right knowledge, and right knowledge comes from reason.

- The Light of the Intellect: Al-Maʿarri believes God has already endowed humanity with an internal guide:

"And quench not the Almighty's beams, for lo, He hath given to all a lamp of intelligence for use and enjoying."

- Reason Weakens the Soul (Appetites): Sound intelligence must subdue the lower nature of man:

"The reason, if it be sane, doth ever weaken the soul until she dies..."

(Referring to the appetitive soul,)

2. Rejection of Tradition, Dogma, and Revelation

A cornerstone of Al-Maʿarri's epistemology is his rejection of inherited sources of knowledge, which he views as deliberate falsehoods designed to manipulate the masses.

- Religion as Inherited Fable:

"Religion is a fable invented by the ancients."

"A story is handed down from him..."

"The Nights wear out Religion, even as the Shar'abi mantle becomes outworn. 'Tis all (a matter of) custom: the greybeard follows the same bent to which the youth is habituated."

He critiques blind conformity, noting that even the nature of God is accepted without question:

"The emerging child is taught... Those who live in silos and worshipers in mosques... take with them the news of the news from the informant, not distinguishing the certificate from the lying."

- Prophets as Fabricators:

"Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true; they are all fabrications. Men lived comfortably till they came and spoiled life. The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce."

- Discredit of Religious Texts:

"As for our reason, it questions not, but swears they are lies; and reason's tree never hath veracity for its fruit."

> He adds that the book (Sahib) purporting to contain authentic traditions is:

"False beyond doubt."

3. Skepticism and the Limits of Knowledge

While advocating reason, Al-Maʿarri maintains a skeptical stance regarding the possibility of attaining absolute truth—especially concerning metaphysical questions like God, the afterlife, and fate.

- *Doubt as a Path:*

"Doubt every one, even him, the seeming slave."

His central themes include: "Doubt, a way to truth."

- Uncertainty and Supposition:

"Certainty is not to be found in a time whose sagacity brought us no result but supposition."

- The Mysteries of the Beyond:

"I have no knowledge of what is after death: already this nose-ring hath made my nose bleed."

"Some have held that nothing is real: did they affirm, then, as a fact that there is no misery or happiness?"

- Physical Senses Are Deceptive:

"The eye does not show things as they really are: make thought thy mirror."

4. The Method of Philosophical Inquiry: Dissimulation

Given the repressive political and religious climate of his time, Al-Maʿarri often disguised his controversial ideas. His poetic method became an essential part of his epistemology—a way of communicating truth through irony, metaphor, and calculated contradiction.

- Irony and Dissimulation (Taqiyyah):

"Our minds have long been forced to lie. We speak in metaphor and write that as we say it is 'tis not."

"I lift my voice whene'er I talk in vain, but do I speak the truth? Hushed are my lips again."

- Calculated Inconsistency:

"The former class of statements is to be suspected."

He used self-contradiction to avoid indictment for infidelity, allowing him to speak to the wise while evading the wrath of the authorities.

Al-Maʿarri's epistemology is a rare blend of intellectual courage, philosophical rigor, and literary subtlety.

He believed that truth must be earned—not inherited—and that reason, not revelation, is the only trustworthy guide.

In a world of dogma and deception, he chose doubt, and in doing so, became one of the most radical thinkers of the classical Islamic world.

17 : The Utopia of Al-Maʿarri

Paradise Without Illusion

Every philosopher, whether materialist or idealist, prophet or poet, has imagined a utopia. Just as Marx envisioned a classless society, Abu al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri envisioned a world of justice, reason, and peace. But his utopia was not built on material excess or divine reward. It was a paradise on earth, stripped of illusion, purified of religious conflict, and elevated by intellect.

Al-Maʿarri's utopia is not a place of sensual indulgence. He criticized excessive pleasures, especially in his later works, and rejected the idea that paradise should be a banquet of flesh and wine. Instead, his ideal world is built on love, justice, respect, and equality—a life without religious division.

He believed that religion, far from uniting people, had made them hate each other after once living in peace.

"Religions have been the cause of enmity among people, though they were once united."

Paradise Reimagined: Risālat al-Ghufrān

The clearest expression of Al-Maʿarri's utopian vision appears in his prose masterpiece, Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness).

Written as a satirical reply to the poet Ibn al-Qāriḥ, the work imagines a journey through the afterlife, where the protagonist visits Paradise and converses with the dead.

This imaginative setting allowed Al-Maʿarri to explore who truly deserves forgiveness—and to challenge conventional theology. His Paradise is populated not by saints and scholars, but by pagan poets, skeptics, and literary minds.

"He visits the Jannat and there meets the pagan bards of Arabia lulling themselves in eternal bliss…"

This bold depiction—placing heathen poets in Muslim Paradise—was considered an "audacious burlesque" by his contemporaries. It was a utopia of the mind, not the mosque.

The Citizens of Paradise

Among those granted forgiveness in Al-Maʿarri's utopia are:

- Imru' al-Qais, the pre-Islamic poet, who enters Paradise through intercession.

- Sibawayh, the grammarian, and other literary figures who continue their debates in the afterlife.

- Jinn, like Abu Huddrash, who believed in Muhammad and were welcomed into the realm.

- Nymphs (Hour), who appear not as objects of desire but as beings shaped by the traveler's own imagination.

"She was reserved for you before God created the world… and you may form her as you like."

This Paradise is not static—it is intellectual, poetic, and self-created.

Sensory and Symbolic Beauty

Al-Maʿarri's utopia includes symbolic pleasures that transcend the material:

- Rivers of milk and honey, created not by bees but by divine command.
- Trees whose shade stretches from East to West.
- Wine that heals headaches but causes no harm.
- Eternal health, where "sickness does not intimidate" and "death does not descend."

Yet these are not indulgences—they are metaphors for balance, purity, and peace.

A World Beyond Religion

Al-Maʿarri's utopia is defined by its absence of religious dogma. He believed that true peace could only be achieved when people stopped dividing themselves by creed.

"The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce."

In his ideal world, forgiveness is not earned through ritual, but through intellect and compassion.

Poets are honored, skeptics are welcomed, and the torments of Hell are observed only to remind the blessed of their freedom.

The Final Message

Al-Maʿarri's utopia is not a reward for belief—it is a rebuke of belief. It is a realm where reason reigns, where literature lives on, and where the soul is free from fear. His Paradise is not built on gold or virgins, but on the enduring power of thought.

“O Reason, thou alone speakest the truth. Then perish the fools who forged the traditions.”

In a world torn by dogma, Al-Maʿarri imagined a utopia where the mind could finally rest.

18: The Political Thought of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri: Reason Against Power

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri’s political philosophy is deeply rooted in his pessimism, rationalism, and asceticism. Living in a time of political instability and religious conflict in 11th-century Syria, he developed a sharp critique of corruption, hypocrisy, and violence—especially when wielded by religious and political authorities.

1. Foundational Philosophical Critique

Al-Maʿarri was a committed skeptic and controversial rationalist, believing that reason must reign over tradition. This intellectual stance formed the foundation of his critique of political and religious systems.

- Pessimism and Isolation: Calling himself a “double prisoner” of blindness and solitude, he chose a life of seclusion. He withdrew from society not out of apathy, but out of despair for the “world of facts,” committing his thoughts to works like Risālat al-Ghufrān and the Luzūmiyyāt.

- Advocacy for Social Justice: Despite his isolation, Al-Maʿarri advocated for justice. His poetry contains profound social commentary, exposing inequality and moral decay.

- Universal Condemnation of Mankind: He often viewed humanity as incorrigible:

> “Choose either solitude akin to death, or the company of hypocrites.”

2. Critique of Political Corruption and Rulers

Al-Maʿarri's writings paint a vivid picture of degeneracy among the powerful:

- Tyranny and Venality: He condemned tyrants, corrupt judges, and hypocritical theologians.

- Religious and Legal Corruption: He reserved special criticism for the ʿulamāʾ:

"Their legal crew have visages bleak as crags."

"Religion is made to serve the pelf of man."

"Wealth hushes Truth and swells the loud Error's voice."

- Monarchs Are Miserable: He viewed kings as the most wretched of men:

"Monarchy is ignoble and not worth a smile."

3. Ideas on Government and Authority

Al-Maʿarri offered radical insights into the nature of governance:

- Democratic Theory Anticipated: He anticipated the idea that rulers are paid servants of the people, not divine authorities.

He argued that the poor hermit enjoys greater freedom than the monarch.

- Opposition to Violence and War: He opposed all forms of violence:

"Draw not the sword for bloodshed—Time already unsheathes a slaughterous blade."

He lamented the suffering of innocents in places like Ramla, caused by the crimes of rulers.

- Condemnation of Fanaticism: He denounced sectarian extremism:

“Men take the wrong direction—becoming extreme Shiʿites or bigoted Sunnis.”

“The worst of mankind is a monarch who wishes his subjects to worship him.”

4. Dynastic and Sectarian Critiques

Al-Maʿarri lived during the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate and the rise of Fatimid influence. He criticized both sides:

- Abbasid Decline: He mourned the fall of the Abbasids to the Buwayhids:

“The Caliph has become like a falcon for falconers or a dog for huntsmen.”

Despite his criticism, he generally sympathized with the Abbasids.

- Carmathians and Fatimids: He fiercely attacked the Carmathians, calling them partisans of the false prophet Musaylima. He accused them of seeking to destroy Arab power and the religion of Islam.

5. Practical Political Involvement

Though reclusive, Al-Maʿarri was occasionally drawn into public affairs:

- Intercession: He acted as a mediator with Emirs on behalf of his village.

- Siege of Maʿarra (1027): During the siege by Salih ibn Mirdas, he successfully interceded for the release of prisoners.

Yet in his poetry, he expressed disdain for the citizens' plan, calling the peace "hypocrisy."

6. Irony and Dissimulation

To survive under unstable regimes, Al-Maʿarri employed irony and taqiyyah—religious dissimulation—to veil his radical views on

"Our minds have long been forced to lie. We speak in metaphor and write that as we say it is 'tis not."

This method allowed him to critique power while avoiding persecution.

Al-Maʿarri's political thought is not a blueprint for revolution—it is a philosophical rebellion. He rejected tyranny, fanaticism, and corruption, and imagined a world governed by reason, justice, and restraint. In an age of swords and sermons, he chose the pen—and with it, carved one of the most courageous critiques of authority in classical Arabic literature.

19: Al-Maʿarri Against the Muslim Sharia: Reason, Mercy, and Rebellion

Al-Maʿarri Against the Muslim Sharia: Reason, Mercy, and Rebellion

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri's philosophical stance on violence, cruelty, and legal authority places him in direct opposition to many foundational principles of Islamic law (Sharia).

His rationalist worldview, ethical veganism, and poetic defiance of religious dogma form a coherent critique of physical punishment, judicial hypocrisy, and ritualistic worship.

General Opposition to Violence and Cruelty

(The Ethical Basis)

Al-Maʿarri's entire ethical foundation rested on non-injury (ahimsā), a principle he applied universally.

This stance directly contradicts the conditional acceptance of violence (e.g., in war, punishment, and slaughter) within Sharia.

- Ethical Veganism as Proof:

His strict veganism was a living protest against Sharia's allowance for the slaughter of animals (dhabīḥa). He wrote in his Luzūmiyyāt:

"Do not unjustly eat what the water has given up, and do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals,

/ Or the white (milk) of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young, not for noble ladies."

Condemnation of Warfare:

His blanket injunction against violence is a philosophical rejection of Jihad (warfare) as conceived under religious law:

"I charge thee, draw not a sword for bloodshed."

2. Critique of Punishment and Judicial Principles

(The Legal Rebellion)

Al-Maʿarri extended his rejection of violence to the state's legal mechanisms, seeing the judiciary as inherently flawed and brutal.

- Rejection of Retaliation (Qisās):

The legal principle of retaliation (Qisās), the "eye for an eye" punishment mandated by Sharia, was condemned by Al-Ma'arri's mercy-first ethic.

Though the original quote is a broad condemnation of violence, scholars confirm he viewed Qisās as morally primitive.

- Scorn for Religious Judges (Qāḍī):

He saw religious judges as corrupt hypocrites who cloaked their self-interest in piety.

He wrote in the Luzūmiyyāt:

"What man was ever found to be a judge and to refrain from giving judgments like the judgment of Sodom [Sodom]?"

He described the legal class as having "visages bleak as crags," associating their legal pronouncements with moral barrenness.

- Abolition of Corporal Punishment (Ḥudūd): His poetic allusions to physical punishment were subtle but pointed, such as the quote:

"They apologized for her cutting his hand."

This line reflects his discomfort with the Ḥudūd penalties, specifically amputation for theft, which is a key Sharia punishment.

His critique is not just on the cruelty, but on the social decay that leads to such measures.

3. Preference for Cremation Over Post-Mortem Torture

(The Ritual Rebellion)

Al-Maʿarri's preference for cremation over the required Muslim burial is perhaps his most radical physical divergence from Sharia practice.

-Sparing the Deceased:

Burial requires the deceased to face the terrifying interrogation by the angels Munkar and Nakīr in the grave.

Al-Ma'arri praised cremation precisely as a means of evading this process:

"Cremation helps the deceased win peace from the strait of the grave and ordeal by the angels twain."

- Return to Fire:

By advocating for the body's return to fire rather than decomposition in the earth, Al-Ma'arri subverts the entire Islamic eschatology surrounding the body and the grave. This non-Islamic practice reflects his desire to spare the body from both physical and theological torment

4. Rejection of Authority, Tradition, and Revelation

(The Foundational Rebellion)

The Sharia is founded on divine revelation (Quran and Sunna). Al-Ma'arri's elevation of Reason above all else constituted a direct philosophical rebellion against the foundation of Islamic law.

- Supremacy of Reason:

He declared the human intellect to be the true divine source:

"Reason is the only prophet and guide," or "The living oracle of the soul."

- Dismissal of Sacred Texts:

He dismissed the sources of Sharia as unreliable human artifacts. This quote is central to his skepticism:

"Religion is a fable invented by the ancients," and "Sacred books are idle tales any age could have produced."

- **Rejection of Commandments:** He scorned the Sharia commands found in various scriptures:

"The Book of Mohammed, the Book of Moses, the Gospel, and the Psalms—all contain bans no nation heeded."

This quote, found in his Luzūmiyyāt, dismisses the scriptural authority of the entire Abrahamic legal tradition.

5. Opposition to Ritual and Religious Formalism

(The Practical Rebellion)

Al-Maʿarri treated Sharia rituals (ʿibādāt) as hollow, often pagan, traditions that distracted from true ethics.

- Condemnation of Hajj:

He dismissed the annual pilgrimage as a pagan remnant:

"A pagan’s journey."

His critique focused on the ethical bankruptcy of the ritual, arguing that "righteousness is essential," not rituals like prayers or fasting.

- Critique of Hypocrisy:

He saw religious practice as a cover for moral corruption:

"A group might go on the surface of worshipers while holding an atheist belly."

He concluded: "If worship serves only to engineer fraud, those who forsake it are nearer to God."

Final Reflection

Al-Maʿarri's critique of Sharia is not a rejection of morality—it is a defense of conscience over commandment, reason over ritual, and mercy over law. He elevates the unwritten law of universal justice above the religious code, declaring that true virtue lies not in rigid obedience, but in boundless compassion, proving that "He who forsakes worship to avoid fraud is nearer to God than he who performs it with deceit."

20: Al-Maʿarri and the Obsession with Women in Islam.

Asceticism, Critique, and Contradiction.

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri's reflections on sexuality, women, and social norms are deeply shaped by his ascetic lifestyle, philosophical pessimism, and skeptical view of religious dogma.

While Islam often integrates sexuality into its legal and eschatological frameworks, Al-Maʿarri stood apart—questioning, satirizing, and sometimes condemning the very foundations of these ideas.

1. Views on Marriage, Family, and Antinatalism

Al-Maʿarri lived in seclusion and poverty, refusing to sell his poems or seek worldly gain. This asceticism informed his radical rejection of marriage and reproduction.

He famously never married, and his celibacy was a deeply philosophical stance known as antinatalism—the belief that bringing children into the world is a moral wrong because existence is inherently painful.

His cornerstone ethical statement, intended for his own tombstone, encapsulates this view: "هَذَا جَنَاهُ أَبِي عَلَيَّ وَمَا جَنَيْتُ عَلَى أَحَدٍ" (This wrong was done by my father to me, but never by me to anyone).

This quote is the most profound proof of his stance, positioning his celibacy as an act of compassion against the propagation of suffering.

He saw marriage not as a blessing, but as a burden. In his Luzūmiyyāt, he wrote, "Do not be deceived by the clamor and the bells.

Marriage is a long period of toil, followed by the birth of a child which only deepens your regret." Furthermore, he condemned polygamy as unjust to women and a source of domestic strife, reflecting an ethical objection to the practice.

2. Criticism of Sexualized Worldly Pleasures

Al-Maʿarri renounced sensual desire and viewed lust as a fundamental distraction from reason and virtue.

His poetry frequently portrays women as fleeting illusions, reflecting his philosophical pessimism.

In the Luzūmiyyāt, he describes the deceit of earthly beauty: "Fair ladies, thronging betimes their wonted pleasure to take, / Seem phantoms glittering by, the puppet-shows of an hour."

This suggests that he saw physical beauty and desire as temporary illusions (al-wahm) that distract the soul from true, rational inquiry.

He saw female luxury and adornment as symptomatic of societal decay and spiritual weakness.

He warns against decadence, writing that women who "wear the silks of kings and drink the poisoned wine of pleasure" are destined for the grave's dust.

This links lust and luxury directly to moral and spiritual corruption.

This skepticism is best summarized in his famous, bitter metaphor where he uses feminine imagery to describe the world's deceit: "The world is a harlot."

He describes it as an "ugly crone who bewitches men," using the sexualized female body as the ultimate symbol of the world's moral and spiritual danger.

3. Sexuality in the Context of Religion

Al-Maʿarri’s most subversive critiques were directed at the religious integration of sexuality, especially in divine promises and legal frameworks.

He directly challenged the moral authority of religious war and spoils. He asks a skeptical question regarding the seizure of women in war:

"Did a prophet’s ordinance bestow on Arab lords the women of their foe. "

This quote, challenging the concept of sabaya (female captives) being granted to victors, questions whether such laws are based on divine justice or merely earthly, tribal lust.

This critique extends to the afterlife in his satirical work, Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness). Here,

Al-Ma'arri famously parodies the Quranic promise of heavenly maidens (Houris). Characters in his paradise describe their encounters with nymphs and "delicious trees in Heaven."

By focusing on this sensual, earthly fantasy as the primary reward, he subtly suggests that the core value being promised is base carnal desire, not transcendent spiritual bliss.

Final Reflection

Al-Maʿarri’s thoughts on women and sexuality are shaped by his absolute rejection of desire and his demand for moral purity. His views reflect both the ascetic rigor of a recluse and the sharp irony of a skeptic.

He uses the theme of sexuality to illustrate his overarching conclusion: truly spiritual life demands a complete withdrawal from the desires of the body and the corrupting norms of a faith-based society.

Resources

Primary Works and Attributed Collections of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri

While the medieval historian Adh-Dhahabi listed forty-eight works attributed to Al-Maʿarri—and Al-Ṣafadī added fourteen more—most of these have unfortunately perished. However, based on surviving Arabic and English sources, the following eleven specific works and collections can be reliably documented:

1. Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness)

A visionary prose work often compared to Dante's Divine Comedy. It explores themes of salvation, forgiveness, and the afterlife through satirical dialogue with deceased poets.

2. Luzūm mā lā yalzam (Unnecessary Necessity, also known as Luzūmiyyāt)

A philosophical and poetic collection marked by a complex rhyme scheme and radical ethical reflections. It represents Al-Maʿarri's mature thought and ascetic worldview.

3. Saqṭ az-Zand (The Tinder Spark)

An early poetic collection that includes praise for Aleppan figures and the Hamdanid ruler Saʿd al-Dawla. It showcases Al-Maʿarri's classical style before his turn toward skepticism.

4. The Letters (Rasāʾil)

A body of correspondence rich in quotations and literary allusions. These letters reveal Al-Maʿarri's intellectual memory and engagement with contemporary scholars.

5. Al-Fuṣūl wa-l-Ghāyāt

A lesser-known collection of prose and poetic fragments, often cited for its stylistic experimentation and rhetorical flourishes.

6. Dīwān of Abū al-ʿAlāʾ

Translated into English by Henry Baerlein, this collection offers Western readers access to Al-Maʿarri's verse, including selections from Saqṭ az-Zand and Luzūmiyyāt.

7. Duraiyat’s Office

A specialized collection focused on the description of shields and armor, reflecting Al-Maʿarri’s interest in poetic imagery and martial symbolism.

8. The Message of the Angels

A spiritual or philosophical work, possibly allegorical, that engages with metaphysical themes.

9. Kitāb al-Iʿjāz fī l-Aḥājī wa-l-Alghāz

A riddle and puzzle collection compiled by al-Ḥaẓīrī, which cites Al-Maʿarri’s contributions to Arabic literary enigmas.

10. The Book of Hands

Considered one of his most important works, though its contents are largely lost. It is referenced in medieval bibliographies as a significant philosophical treatise.

11. Commentary on the Works of Al-Mutanabbī

A critical and literary commentary on the celebrated poet Al-Mutanabbī, showcasing Al-Maʿarri’s analytical depth and poetic judgment.

End Note

In this short book, I have tried to present Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarri honestly—without alteration, without apology. His voice is sharp, uncompromising, and often uncomfortable. But it is also deeply human. To quote him:

"The living oracle of the soul is reason."

Al-Maʿarri did not write to please the powerful or flatter the faithful. He wrote to awaken the mind, to challenge inherited truths, and to speak for those who suffer in silence.

His thoughts were not born of hatred, but of love—love for truth, for justice, and for the dignity of the human spirit.

Throughout this book, I have traced the evolution of his ideas—from early poetic praise to the stark clarity of his later works. At his peak, Al-Maʿarri stood alone, refusing to compromise. He said:

"My father brought this on me, but I have none."

That line, carved into his imagined tombstone, is not just antinatalist—it is ethical. It is a refusal to pass on pain. It is love expressed through restraint.

Al-Maʿarri was brave.

He questioned prophets, mocked kings, and rejected the comforts of conformity.

For those who choose to quote him selectively—leaving out the difficult lines, the radical doubts, the moral fire—I say: better not write about him at all. He deserves honesty.

"We speak in metaphor and wot / That as we say it is ’tis not."

Let this book be a testament to that honesty. May it show that Al-Maʿarri’s legacy is not one of bitterness, but of clarity. Not of despair, but of conscience. Not of dogma, but of reason.

And above all, may it remind us that love—real love—is not blind. It sees the world as it is, and still chooses to speak.

Al-Maʿarri: Humanist Philosopher and Rebel Poet

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